

I'm Not a Monk, but I'm a Bodhisattva:  
Green Gulch Farm and the Expression of Zen Buddhism in America

by  
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## Introduction

The most recent venture of the organization [San Francisco Zen Center] is Green Gulch Farm, purchased in the spring of 1972. Fashioned out of seventy acres of bottom land in the foothills of Mount Tamalpais, it was intended to help meet the food needs of the community. It was a magnificent “find” for the San Francisco Zen Center, having remarkable facilities that included (among other structures) a large house (with five bedrooms, two kitchens, a library, two sitting rooms, and an enclosed sauna and swimming pool), a small bunkhouse, a ranch house, a studio, an enormous barn, and numerous outbuildings.

~ Charles Prebish, *American Buddhism*, 1979<sup>1</sup>

Green Gulch was a world landscaped with religion.

~ Ivan Richmond, 2003<sup>2</sup>

The word *Zen* has become ubiquitous throughout American culture. One can now obtain a Zen mp3 player, Zen health insurance, Zen cooking supplies, Zen daily planners, and Zen loans and mortgages. These products often have little to do with the school of Buddhism from which they derive their name, and few seem to draw any inspiration from the Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha. Underneath the hyper-commercialization of *Zen*, however, Zen Buddhism is quietly establishing itself in America, forming monasteries, meditation meetups, communes, community centers, and activist groups. Due to the fluid definition of *Zen Buddhist* and the ever-shifting practices of most American convert Buddhists, it is nearly impossible to determine the exact number of American Zen Buddhists or Zen practice centers. However, a simple Google search for “Zen Centers in America” yields well over two million hits. While the actual number of American Zen Centers is assuredly much smaller, the number indicates the accessibility and popularity of Zen practice in America today.

American Zen Buddhism has also attracted the attention of academics studying religion, many of whom dance across the line between practitioner and scholar in a dizzyingly

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Prebish, *American Buddhism* (North Scituate: Duxbury Press, 1979), 85.

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Richmond, *Silence and Noise: Growing up Zen in America* (New York: Ataria Books, 2003), 128.

complicated and self-reflective waltz. As early as the 1970s, just as Buddhism was beginning to gain popularity, scholars were publishing books on the changing nature of Buddhism in America.<sup>3</sup> Today, the names of Christopher Queen, Thomas Tweed, James Coleman, Richard Hayes, Charles Prebish, and Richard Hughes Seager have become well-known for their study of American Buddhism. A frequent endeavor of scholars has been to attempt a characterization and definition of the American Buddhist. Thomas Tweed talks of “night-stand Buddhists”—individuals who sympathize with the tradition and might read a little concerning Buddhist practices, but do not identify or practice exclusively—and fights for the recognition of their importance in the history of American Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, James Coleman tries to move beyond the restrictive labels of religion—where one is either a Buddhist or not—and instead speaks of concentric circles of involvement ranging from devoted and ordained practitioners in the center to those influenced by Buddhist ideas and Buddhist thought in the outer-circle.<sup>5</sup>

Less common, but still useful, are efforts to theorize American Buddhism as a whole, as Christopher Queen has attempted. Using a model based on Jack Kornfield’s earlier theories, as well as building on his own work on Socially Engaged Buddhism, Queen claims that American Buddhism is characterized by three features—Democratization, Pragmatism, and Engagement.<sup>6</sup> Queen defines *democratization* as “a leveling of traditional spiritual and institutional hierarchies... [with] emphasis on lay practice and the deemphasis of ordained and monastic

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<sup>3</sup> See further Emma McCloy Layman, *Buddhism in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976) ; Charles Prebish, *American Buddhism* (North Scituate: Duxbury Press, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Tweed, “Night-Stand Buddhists and Other Creatures,” *American Buddhism*, ed. Duncan Williams and Christopher Queen (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 71-90.

<sup>5</sup> James Coleman, *The New Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 186-191.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Queen, “Introduction,” *American Buddhism*, ed. Duncan Williams and Christopher Queen (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), xiv – xxxvii.

vocations.”<sup>7</sup> *Pragmatism* indicates the American Buddhist focus on practical action and practice as opposed to faith in cosmic bodhisattvas and Buddhas. *Engagement* reflects Queen’s especial interest in socially-engaged Buddhism and refers to the stretching of the practice to help not only oneself, but all individuals. However, much of this scholarly work is problematic due to the fluid and chaotic nature of Buddhism in America. American Buddhism challenges traditional understandings of religious identity, beliefs, and practices, indicating the need for a more complex and rich appreciation of these concepts. Scholars continue in their attempt to understand how Buddhism is transforming itself in American culture, and how they can transform their own ideas of individual religious practice and identity.

Despite this growing academic interest in American Buddhism, few scholars have discussed the effects and purposes Buddhist communities serve in the lives of American convert Buddhists. Instead, the primary focus has been on the individual Buddhist or the nature of American Buddhism overall. There seems to be an almost unspoken assumption that religious communities are merely the natural outgrowth of any religious tradition, leaving little room for scholars of American religion to consider their importance in the lives of American Buddhists or how they relate to American Buddhist practice. This understanding tends to be simplistic; it overlooks the complexities of the relationship between the practices and beliefs of the individual and the larger context of the religious community. Rather, religious communities serve as a reflection of personal religious ideologies, as well as a means to express those principles in the world. By examining the way in which a religious community fulfills and builds upon personal religious ideals, one can gain a broader and more complete view of a group’s identity and its presence in American culture and society. Broadening one’s perspective to include community

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<sup>7</sup> Queen, xix.

as well as the individual is especially important in nontraditional American religions, such as Buddhism. The institutionalization of these religions is particularly significant and informative in light of the comparatively few adherents and the widespread cultural ignorance—or, at times, animosity—on the part of the broader society.

One such Buddhist community within the American Soto Zen tradition is Green Gulch Farm. Located north of San Francisco in Marin County, Green Gulch Farm is a residential community operated by the San Francisco Zen Center, an influential American Zen practice center created by Japanese priest Shunryu Suzuki in the 1960s. The San Francisco Zen Center is made up of three communities—Green Gulch Farm, the City Center, and Tassajara—each with a very different personality and attracting different practitioners. While City Center is in the heart of San Francisco and openly welcomes visitors, Tassajara rests in the secluded wilderness four hours south of the city and strictly follows monastic practice, accepting guests only in the summer. Founded by the Dharma Heir of Shunryu Suzuki—Richard Baker—in 1972, Green Gulch Farm combines the natural setting of Tassajara with the City Center’s commitment to openness and interaction with nonresidents. While keeping a traditional monastic schedule in a secluded location, visitors and guests are encouraged to come every Sunday, when there is a public meditation service and Dharma lecture. Despite being founded by Baker, Green Gulch Farm was originally a dream of Suzuki’s, who hoped for a place where families could practice Zen Buddhism in community while still maintaining family life. To this end, Baker bought Green Gulch from a local rancher, George Wheelwright, and using a team of eager Zen students turned the cattle ranch into a Soto Zen Buddhist temple. Since that time, it has been a residential Buddhist practice center for individuals, couples, and families.

Today, Green Gulch Farm is a fluid community of about fifty residents staying anywhere from three months to twenty-five years, with constant streams of shorter staying guests, guest students, retreatants, and volunteers. In return for room and board—in some cases including health insurance and a small allowance—residents work in a variety of areas at Green Gulch Farm. True to its name, Green Gulch is a working organic farm, though it also offers extensive retreat, conference, garden, and religious services. The heart of Green Gulch Farm is the zendo, where the majority of meditation and ritual services take place. All residents wake up at 4:30 every morning to attend two 40-minute zazen sessions followed by a 30-minute service. Another zazen and service occurs in the afternoon at 5:00, with an additional optional night zazen at 7:30. Despite its many opportunities in the garden, the kitchen, or farm, residents are at Green Gulch primarily for the Buddhist practice. However, this Buddhist practice can range anywhere from mere curiosity, to long-time passion, to a lifetime vocation as a Buddhist priest. Despite this variance in interest among residents and guests, the Green Gulch Farm community is united by Zen Buddhism, and it is the focal point of daily life.

I first visited Green Gulch Farm with the Antioch Buddhist Studies in Japan program, whose three-day orientation was held at Green Gulch Farm. It was my first experience with residential Buddhist practice, and I left awed and excited. My interest grew after observing Soto Zen practice in Japan, from which the San Francisco Zen Center lineage sprung, and realizing how different Green Gulch Farm was from its progenitor. I traveled to Green Gulch Farm in the summer of 2007 intending to study the ways in which Green Gulch was changing and modifying the Japanese tradition to fit an American religious context. However, during my time at Green Gulch, my plans changed. As I did more and more interviews, the question of how Soto Zen Buddhism as a whole was metamorphosizing seemed less interesting and less important. I was

instead becoming fascinated by the people of Green Gulch and the community they were making. In a mix of confusion and admiration, I found myself able to think of little else but “Why are these people here?” What was it that was attracting all these people to Green Gulch Farm? Why take months or years out of one’s life to work for no pay and to spend one’s precious free time sitting silently and staring at the wall in a converted barn for hours on end? Why chant long passages in a language even modern Japanese speakers would barely understand? Why every Sunday open the doors of the zendo to anyone who wants to come in, provide them free zazen instruction and Dharma lecture, and then patiently clean up the mess they leave behind? Why live at Green Gulch Farm at all?

With that, I reviewed the desirability of my previous research question. I instead began to question what was bringing people to Green Gulch Farm. The response was invariably Buddhist practice and the opportunity to deepen that practice. But that answer itself created other questions: How was Green Gulch Farm accomplishing this? What specifically was it deepening? Why practice Buddhism at all? Rather than studying American adaptations of Japanese traditions as I had originally intended, I found myself instead struggling to understand individual attraction to Zen Buddhism, and how Green Gulch Farm was deepening personal Buddhist practice and identity.

The answer became clearer once I began to see the residents of Green Gulch Farm in the larger context of American culture. Throughout their interviews, the Buddhist practitioners at Green Gulch expressed strong feelings of alienation from the larger American culture and its ideals, a sentiment which instigated their personal spiritual quests and often preceded the start of Buddhist practice. Esteemed scholar of post-World War II American religion and society, Robert Wuthnow has argued that this alienation is due in large part to the chaotic world in which

contemporary Americans exist, awash with an overwhelming whirl of possibilities, hypocrisies, philosophies, and contradictions. This confusion encourages Americans to critically examine their own culture, which they find wanting. American Buddhist practitioners view American society as laced with rampant consumerism—hurting not only individual American psyches and relationships, but all beings in the world. When considering the bewilderingly complex world and specifically the American consumer culture, traditional American religions are often perceived as self-absorbed and unable to effectively engage the problems caused by modern consumer society. Therefore, some Americans move away from religions and philosophies they regard as supporting continued materialism and focusing on personal salvation—Christianity and Judaism—to those intent on gaining a more global salvation not only for oneself, but for all individuals.

As a Mahayana Buddhist tradition, Zen Buddhism contains the bodhisattva ideal and an oft-repeated rhetoric of *saving all beings*, infusing individuals' Buddhist practice with a purpose of global salvation in contrast to the perceived selfishness of American society and traditional religion. A crucial piece of saving all beings is saving oneself, and American Zen Buddhist practice is focused on first helping individuals heal themselves from the intense emotional pain sometimes perceived as the product of materialism. Only then do American Buddhist practitioners feel that they can begin to heal the suffering of others. To achieve the dual goal of saving oneself and saving all beings, Green Gulch Farm acts as a service commune, rejecting the consumer features of American culture and working to reeducate the larger society by providing an alternative—Buddhism. Therefore, Green Gulch Farm provides American Zen Buddhists an opportunity to put the rhetoric of saving all beings into action through participation in a service



commune with the prospect of educating the larger American population in an alternate way to live.

To complete my research, I spent five weeks at Green Gulch Farm, doing intensive field study, taping Dharma lectures, and performing interviews. While there, I worked primarily with the guest student program, which is an inexpensive way for those interested in Buddhist residential life to explore it. Because of this, my perception of Green Gulch is almost entirely from the perspective of a novice guest student in the community. I was not given access to higher level meetings or to experience the community from the positions of a Dharma teacher or Crew Head. However, the majority of individuals in the community were on levels similar to my own; there were only a few high-level Dharma teachers, and they were on the whole very accessible and willing to participate in interviews. I completed thirty-eight interviews during my stay, with interviewees ranging in age from 18 to 78 and most from upper-middle economic class. These were taped on a digital recorder and then transcribed by myself. The length of the interviews varied from twenty minutes to almost two hours. The majority were performed in a secluded side dining room, though others took place in the library, the office, the main dining room, farm fields, the beach, or even in a car as we drove to get groceries for the kitchen crew. All names and minor details have been changed to protect the anonymity of each individual. However, if the interviewee went by their Dharma name, I attempted to preserve that fact by giving them a pseudonym made from Japanese syllables. In addition to my field research, I relied upon the San Francisco Zen Center's extensive collection of published Dharma lectures—by both Shunryu Suzuki and Reb Anderson—as well as other published narrative accounts of life at the San Francisco Zen Center and Green Gulch (primarily *Silence and Noise*, *The Crooked Cucumber*,

and *Shoes Outside the Door*). I also analyzed Green Gulch's website, as well as several online newsletters, to support my research.

Throughout this work, I use the term *resident* to refer to any individual who was living at Green Gulch and following the community's full daily schedule for a week or more. The community generally defines a resident as someone who is a staff member and has been living at Green Gulch for much longer. However, Green Gulch Farm is composed of a fluid group of individuals living and working there, who all follow the same schedule and participate in the same activities, whether their stay is a week or a decade. Therefore, as the community I studied was a construction of the unique mix of those present at the time, I feel that using the term *resident* is appropriate for any individual who followed the daily life of the community, without regard to the length of their stay. Because of this broad definition, *resident* can include guest students who were present only for seven days to priests living at the community for over twenty years. If the length of someone's residence at Green Gulch Farm or other San Francisco Zen Center locations is important or provides strength to their interview, I will specifically note this before quoting them.

## Chapter 1

Since the end of World War II, religious beliefs have no longer been taken for granted among much of the American population—inherited from parents and forbearers as if a certain eye color or blood type—but must be found by each individual. In this chapter, I will briefly touch on explanations for the origins of American religious quest culture. My interviews indicate that the spiritual quest culture is alive and well today, so I will examine its modern source, connecting it to the increasingly apparent chaos of the modern world. The confusing array of possibilities and contradictions in the world often causes Americans to cast a self-reflective look at their own culture. American Buddhist practitioners find American society severely wanting, particularly due to its extensive materialism and consumerism. This realization creates strong feelings of alienation from the traditional American culture, instigating a spiritual quest which eventually leads to the practice of Zen Buddhism.

For many scholars, the contemporary American religious landscape is defined by the predominance of a quest culture. Wade Clark Roof, a theorist of American religion, argues for a modern American religious quest culture, filled with spiritual seekers searching for a personal understanding of divinity. In this contemporary culture of seeking, Roof argues for the development of a “spiritual marketplace,” with religious organizations operating less as spiritual homes and more as “supplier[s] of goods and services.”<sup>8</sup> Americans then pick and choose practices and beliefs from these suppliers to construct a unique religious identity. While it is tempting to see this quest culture operating only in movements such as convert Buddhism, Roof stresses that “[All] open-ended accounts of religious life are likely to reveal some degree of eclecticism, or constellation of elements and themes from differing faiths and traditions, put

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<sup>8</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

together by individuals exercising their creative agency.”<sup>9</sup> Roof conceives of Americans as consumers within a spiritual marketplace, creating their own unique religious identities through the prevalent quest culture.

Robert Wuthnow agrees with Roof’s assessment of the influence of the quest culture in American religion, claiming that “the grand narrative of religious and philosophical tradition was replaced by personalized narratives of exploration and expression.”<sup>10</sup> He explains quest culture not as a spiritual marketplace, but rather as a shift from dwelling-oriented spirituality to seeker-oriented spirituality.<sup>11</sup> Dwelling-oriented spirituality “emphasizes *habitation*: God occupies a definite place in the universe and creates a sacred space in which humans too can dwell; to inhabit sacred space is to know its territory and to feel secure.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast, seeker-oriented spirituality, the spirituality many Americans have today, focuses on “*negotiation*: individuals search for sacred moments that reinforce their conviction that the divine exists, but these moments are fleeting; rather than knowing the territory, people explore new spiritual vistas, and they have to negotiate among complex and confusing meanings of spirituality.”<sup>13</sup> Like Roof, Wuthnow argues for an American religious quest culture, which he conceives of as a shift from dwelling- to seeker-oriented spirituality. Since the end of the 1950s, the American religious landscape has become focused on the individual quest of each person to meet and participate with divinity—as each interprets it—through eclectic blending and choice.

The language of American religious quest culture was prevalent throughout the narratives of Green Gulch residents. The most extreme form of quest and seeker spirituality was in

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<sup>9</sup> Roof, 35–36.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 83.

<sup>11</sup> Wuthnow, 25.

<sup>12</sup> Wuthnow, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Wuthnow, 4.

individuals who framed their approach to Buddhist practice with actual physical travel, often to exotic locations. Baldur, a resident in his late 40s, spoke of an epic trek across India and much of Asia with his wife during which they first discovered Buddhism together. In an event he considers to be karmic, he and his wife were invited to meditate by a woman in Bali whom they had encountered several times on their trip. After she asked if they would join her at a meditation retreat, Baldur said that he felt “an inner response happening.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Hannagei, an ordained priest, first decided to commit herself to Buddhist practice on a holiday in Europe:

I was traveling through Europe and came to the Black Sea, and I was sitting there thinking, “What am I doing with my life?” I had an image of my inner teacher coming up and saying, “I’m just following my wants.” If I want to appreciate life, I need to find a way to cease it, to let it cease these wants.<sup>15</sup>

Manifesting an extreme form of quest culture, physical travel surrounded personal narratives of Buddhist practice for several Green Gulch residents.

Beyond actual physical quests such as that of Baldur and Hannagei, many individuals conceived of their initial approach to Buddhism as a more inwardly-directed spiritual quest. Describing her seeking attitude before coming to Green Gulch, Gwen, a long-time resident and priest, recounted:

Well, I was looking for different things. I went to a Bible Study, just any religion, not necessarily Buddhism. I would go to bookstores and just look through different books on religion. I was in a Sufi group, and it was a friend from Sufi group, though I knew him before, who showed me Green Gulch.<sup>16</sup>

Kojitsu’s narrative also speaks of a broad spiritual quest which led him to Green Gulch Farm. While he has been a resident of Green Gulch for over 30 years, he spoke of his younger self:

Yeah, I was looking, along with a lot of my friends—I belonged to a radical theater group at the time—we were all experimenting with different lifestyles, you might say, or different ways of being in the world. And so we went to the Hare

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<sup>14</sup> Baldur (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 15 June 2007.

<sup>15</sup> Hannagei (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 16 June 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Gwen. Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

Krishna, big thing in the park. And Uttananda was here at that time. Anyway, there was a big movement in those days; you know it was the 70s, late 60s. So one day, this friend of mine who had been artistic director for the theater said, “Hey, there’s this Zen Center, let’s go over to it.”<sup>17</sup>

Like many Green Gulch residents, Kojitsu used quest language to conceptualize his initiation of Buddhist practice as the result of a long and difficult inward spiritual journey of searching and experimentation.

While most interviewees did not explain their Buddhist identity in terms of extensive quest narratives, all individuals acknowledged, at least implicitly, the presence of a spiritual quest. Clement, a man in his 50s who stayed at Green Gulch for a short period as a guest student, said that he explicitly picked and chose from various religious traditions to construct an identity. In response to a question concerning whether he considered himself a Buddhist, Clement explained, “I just practice and take what I can from this.”<sup>18</sup> Erec, an ordained Buddhist priest, told me that “the most important thing in my life has always been my spiritual quest.”<sup>19</sup> He went on to reinforce this spiritual quest as “the most important thing to be alive to explore.”<sup>20</sup> Odin, also an ordained priest, framed his personal social frustrations in terms of his spiritual seeking: “I understand that it’s hard because I am a spiritual seeker; I am someone who is mostly celibate and on that path.”<sup>21</sup> Another priest, Morgan, clearly envisioned a spiritual quest throughout her life when she spoke of the universe laying out “the path stones for me.”<sup>22</sup> The pervasive assumption of the necessity to seek personal interpretations of spirituality held by many Green Gulch residents evinces the ubiquity of quest culture in American religious life.

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<sup>17</sup> Kojitsu (resident 30 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Clement (resident 1 week). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 June 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Erec (resident 15 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Erec (resident 15 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Odin (6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 7 June 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Morgan. Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

American religious quest culture is largely considered by theorists to be a result of the tumultuous decade of the 1960s. Wade Clark Roof writes, “for those born from 1946 to 1964, there was a break with institutional religious authority that has had lasting consequences for both institutions and individuals.”<sup>23</sup> Roof cites the turbulent period from 1963 to 1973 as a source for great religious confusion, defection, and experimentation. He notes that those years are “now remembered for anti-Vietnam War protests, civil rights struggles, gender revolution, environmental awareness, and experimentation with new lifestyles...[it was] one of the most turbulent, chaotic periods of American history.”<sup>24</sup> Robert Wuthnow agrees with Roof’s interpretation of the 1960s environment and powerfully describes the hectic and confused emotions of that generation:

The 1960s forcefully created the realization that things were not so easily controlled. Race relations in the United States were out of control. The young president who dreamed of controlling the world was tragically slain—and people could not bring themselves to believe the tragedy was without larger significance. Increasingly, the offspring of those staid suburbs of the fifties were beyond the control of their parents. Institutions were being questioned, as was the identity of the nation. Religious leaders declared that God was dead.<sup>25</sup>

While Leigh Eric Schmidt argues quite effectively that spiritual seeking has always been a feature of American religious life,<sup>26</sup> it had never been so mainstream or had challenged traditional religions so strongly before the 1960s. It was in this environment that American convert Buddhism, the San Francisco Zen Center, and Shunryu Suzuki began their rise to popularity.

What Roof does not explain is why after the end of this chaotic period, once everyone began to become acclimated to the changes, society did not cease its dramatic spiritual seeking.

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<sup>23</sup> Roof, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Roof, 51.

<sup>25</sup> Wuthnow, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005).

He assumes that people are happier as spiritual seekers, and that once they tasted such a forbidden fruit, they would never wish to return to their old ways of religion. I, however, disagree with this assumption. Forging an identity from a mishmash of various religious practices and beliefs is hard—like picking one piece from several different puzzles and then trying to force those pieces to fit. I have great faith in the human ability to strive and achieve, to seek and understand, but only if there is continued impetus making the simple acceptance of religious complacency a non-option. If there is a way easier, less complicated, less painful—though possibly less glorious and less fulfilling—to do something, humans will take the easier route. However, as my interviews indicate, the quest culture is still quite present in the minds and dialogues of American Buddhists. Therefore, something must be continuing to push Americans to question traditional religious structures and to construct their own spiritualities.

Robert Wuthnow follows Roof's ideas a little further, and considers what is driving Americans today to develop and maintain seeker-oriented spirituality. While the 1960s are over, Wuthnow notes that the confusion and chaos of that period has not disappeared, it has only left the public arena:

Many people take classes that expose them to science, secular philosophy, and the teachings of world religions. Large numbers of Americans participate in self-help groups, struggle with addictions, undergo therapy, and are exposed to endless sensationalism about spirituality in the media. Collectively, Americans have witnessed wars and genocide on a scale that raises fundamental spiritual questions. They have seen public figures murdered and watched as violence and drugs consumed their children. Many Americans have experienced unparalleled affluence and many have attained advanced degrees. Yet they have found that their personal lives are filled with advertisements and anxiety.<sup>27</sup>

Wuthnow later specifically addresses the causes of the modern quest culture:

If any single factor can be identified as the source of [the modern quest culture], it is the increasingly complex social and cultural environment in which Americans

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<sup>27</sup> Wuthnow, 2-3.



live. As a people, Americans face conditions that are nearly out of control—environmental pollution, worldwide hunger and poverty, AIDS, crime, terrorism—and, as individuals, they know they can do little about these problems.<sup>28</sup>

Many Americans are still bewildered; they are lost and alienated from the traditional beliefs and communities which used to protect them. No longer can an individual rest assured that his or her community's way of doing things is the only, or even the best, way. Buddhist writer Richard Hayes compares the world Americans face today with the world faced by people of the Hellenistic world:

One of the most important human issues that thinkers [of the Hellenistic era] had to deal with at that time was the problem of how to secure happiness in an insecure and unpredictable world...Whereas the pre-Alexanderian world had had the luxury of taking it for granted that the code of conduct of the local tribe or village was valid for all places and all times, the citizens of the multicultural Hellenistic world were exposed on a daily basis to the fact that human societies with widely different customs and institutions and forms of government could all function very well.<sup>29</sup>

Hayes envisions contemporary American society as encountering and struggling with problems of ideological multiplicity similar to the ancient Hellenistic thinkers. The selfhood of the American nation itself is even in confusion. In his work on the “protean self,” Robert Jay Lifton calls America the “Protean Nation”—one that has lost its identity and struggles with interminable questions:

During the last years of the twentieth century, there has been a deepening of American confusion. With the end of the Cold War, Americans lost a world-clarifying enemy. Over the previous decades, whatever our deficiencies or decline, whatever wrongs we perpetrated abroad or at home, we could still view ourselves, in contrast with Soviet evil, as steady in our virtue. Denied this contrast, we find it hard to see ourselves as steady in anything.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Wuthnow, 11.

<sup>29</sup>Richard Hayes, *Land of No Buddha* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1998), 127.

<sup>30</sup>Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 33.

As noted by several scholars, many Americans today are disorientated and baffled by the speedy changes, reversals, and uncertainties of the world around them.

In reaction to a world so devoid of moral certainties, Americans thoroughly examine their own culture; they often find it filled with hyper-consumerism and materialism, where one's worth is determined by the size of one's bank account, the make of one's car, and the price tag on one's clothes. Authors who have written extensively from an American Buddhist perspective discuss the larger culture as filled with rampant consumerism. In a book of his lectures, *Not Always So*, Shunryu Suzuki explained the dangers of a culture always struggling to gain and accumulate:

Our culture is based on the idea of gaining or accumulating something. Science, for instance, is the accumulation of knowledge. I don't know that a modern scientist is greater than a scientist in the sixteenth century. The difference is that we have accumulated our scientific knowledge. That is a good point and at the same time dangerous. We are in danger of being buried under all our accumulated knowledge. It is like trying to survive without going to the rest room. We are already swimming in the pond of polluted water and air, and we talk about this pollution. At the same time we can hardly survive the pollution of our knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

Reb Anderson, a Dharma teacher in Suzuki's lineage who studied with Suzuki, writes that "the nation flourishes, but you also get what's called skillful generals and crafty ministers. And people build test sites for big bombs to protect the people in the flourishing country."<sup>32</sup> In an introductory text to Zen Buddhism produced by the Sotoshu Shumicho (Soto Zen Buddhist headquarters in Japan), Shohaku Okumura touches on consumerism as a force bringing Americans to Zen Buddhism:

Uchiyama Roshi commented that modern [American and Japanese] people are like Hachiko [a humorous, bumbling Japanese folk hero]. We try to pursue efficiency, but really we don't know where we are going. We work hard to make

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<sup>31</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, *Not Always So*, ed. Edward Espe Brown (New York: Harper, 2002), 43.

<sup>32</sup> Reb Anderson, *Warm Smiles From Cold Mountains* (Berkley: Rodmell Press, 2005), 123.

money, and enjoy the fruits of science and technology, but we don't know where our lives are headed...Our lives as humans have aspects in common with cancer. We work hard just for the sake of our own happiness and satisfaction...But human activity based on desire causes our problems and has been steadily destroying the living network of interdependent origination on the planet.<sup>33</sup>

These negative and painful effects of consumerism are considered a devastating aspect of American culture by many influential Buddhist authors.

Mirroring published Buddhist authors, interviewees highlighted materialism and a constant desire for more as the defining problem in American society today. Disgustedly, Helena described American culture as “just sort of chain stores and big-box retail and major corporations.”<sup>34</sup> Kojitsu explained that Americans are addicted to a consumer culture that sells ideas, not products:

We live in a society that feeds that [desire]. I saw this model of a new car...in old days, the advertising was about the car. Now it's about a lifestyle. If you have this car, then you have the good life. And we buy that, all of us—subliminally, we buy some of that idea. It's very appealing. And of course, people become very disappointed when they realize that people, places, and things ultimately don't satisfy.<sup>35</sup>

When asked to expand on the suffering explicitly caused by consumer culture, Morgan saw an emptiness in humanity which American materialism attempts to fill:

So, it [the source of suffering] could be fear of not having enough, or of being hungry, but it seems to me that it is a fear of some emptiness. I think there is a driving force of fear of not enough of something. In some parts of the world, it's clearly not enough food and not enough safety. I think Maslow was right; I think that the fear of the things that he names in his hierarchy are what drive up a lot of the suffering to fill up that hole. The more you try to fill up the hole, the bigger the hole gets. So, I think hole-filling is a lot of how we cause our own suffering.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Shohaku Okumura, “A Path of Just Sitting: Zazen as the Practice of the Bodhisattva Way,” *Soto Zen: An Introduction to Zazen* (Tokyo: Sotoshu Shumicho, 2002), 11-13.

<sup>34</sup> Helena (resident 1 week). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 28 June 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Kojitsu (resident 30 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

Green Gulch residents parallel popular Buddhist authors in their perception of American culture as poisoned with rampant consumerism, leading to feelings of estrangement from American society.

Lacking the ability to identify with American culture and confronted by a world devoid of moral certainties, Green Gulch residents were disoriented before encountering Buddhism. While few of those interviewed explicitly spoke of feeling alienated or non-integrated with American culture before beginning Buddhist practice, those themes were present quite strongly as a subtext in the conversation. Interviewees frequently discussed feeling “out of alignment” before practicing Buddhism. Helena, who originally came to Buddhist practice as a means of supplementing her depression medication, emphatically explained her feelings of being “out of kilter” throughout her life:

So, for me, one of the things I remember my Zen center teacher saying, one of the very first lessons was about the four Noble Truths. He was talking about life being a wheel out of kilter. And I was like, “Yes!” I try so hard to straighten this darn thing out, and it’s just always out of kilter. I keep wondering, “What am I doing wrong here? It must be in kilter for everyone else.” And it was just such a relief to hear someone articulate it in this way, you know life can feel like a wheel out of kilter all the time. That really struck a chord with me. Finally someone understands! My life’s been out of kilter and try as I might to straighten it out it just doesn’t work...I kept thinking, “If I just get a little more education. If I make a little more money. If I marry this person. If I get a house in this neighborhood. Some day it’s going to feel really great,” and that day never came...I was taught the American way: you go to school, you graduate, you go to college, you get married, you have kids, you get a job...it will be great. And, that wasn’t working. Doesn’t work. Didn’t work for me.<sup>37</sup>

Similar to Helena, Lance also felt that living according to conventional American rules of success left him unfulfilled:

When I worked for Payton-Webber and was making a ton of money, and I went to a party and said, “I’m an investment banker,” the responses were fantastic. That was a very impressive thing. But I never really had any satisfaction from it; when

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<sup>37</sup> Helena (resident 1 week). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 28 June 2007.

we would finish a project or something, it was just anti-climactic for me. It was just on to the next project. Never really understanding...I've got the money; I've got this great apartment; I've got this car; I've got this stuff—so what?<sup>38</sup>

An ordained priest and longtime resident, Delia echoed feelings of being out of alignment. After spending time in South America as a witness for peace, she participated in several demonstrations against Reagan, where she found that her ideals for the world and her vision of herself were not fully integrated:

I found myself filled with a lot of anger. I felt like I was demonstrating for peace, but yet was very angry. So, while in Nicaragua, I met a woman who I had this conversation with. I said, "I'm just so angry." After talking to me, she said, "I think you might be interested in meeting my [Buddhist] teacher."...So it was really political work and kind of feeling not quite right, not quite in alignment of being a peace worker and being so angry inside [that brought Delia to Buddhism].<sup>39</sup>

Themes of being "out of kilter" and "out of alignment" were prevalent in many individuals' interviews as a verbal expression of disaffection from American society.

Several interviewees specifically referred to the complicated world as a force pushing estranged Americans into Buddhism. In his pivotal work, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Shunryu Suzuki himself acknowledges feelings of disorientation as a factor encouraging Buddhist practice, explaining that "many people these days have begun to feel, at least intellectually, the emptiness of the modern world, or the self-contradiction of their culture."<sup>40</sup> Ryoshu—one of the current Abbots of the San Francisco Zen Center—explained that "now, there's much more of a sense of the difficulty of anything [in society] changing, [Zen students] feel more anxiety and fear around environmental issues."<sup>41</sup> Lenore spoke of "this sense that things just aren't right"<sup>42</sup> in the world, which caused her to seek out spiritual answers. Often the seeming nonchalance of

<sup>38</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, ed. Trudy Dixon (Boston: Weatherhill, 1970), 111.

<sup>41</sup> Ryoshu (resident 35 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 26 June 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Lenore (resident 12 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

surrounding peers exacerbated individual feelings of non-integration. Gabrielle, who spent time at Green Gulch when younger and chose to return after several years, spoke of the magnification of her anxiety caused by her peers' apparent apathy. Using a story from her childhood, Gabrielle explained her feeling that she was the only one reacting to the world around her:

I remember being a little girl and having my teachers and parents trying to teach me the connection between letters and sounds. I would see the letter; I would hear the sound, and I would just be like, "What are they talking about?" It's so hard to remember now what that felt like, but there was this fear. I was so lost, and I didn't know what people were talking about, and everyone else seems to know around me.<sup>43</sup>

However, Gabrielle felt that her Buddhist practice helped to release her anxieties. Continuing her childhood metaphor, she compared nirvana—the eventual end-goal of Buddhist practice—to her sudden realization of letters and their adjoining sounds.

I remember the moment it [the letters and sounds] made sense; it made sense! There was this joy and relief and letting go of all those things that had been freaking me out before. If you could do that with the entire universe—that's nirvana.<sup>44</sup>

Green Gulch Farm residents are made anxious by the chaotic surrounding world, which combines with the alienation from American culture to instigate a personal spiritual quest often ending in Buddhism.

The disorientation and estrangement felt by residents before beginning their Buddhist practice is especially indicated by the frequency of homecoming imagery in personal narratives, as a homecoming necessitates a prior period in which one felt misplaced or estranged.

Throughout my stay at Green Gulch, individuals in casual conversation would refer to Buddhism as a "coming home to oneself" or as "my spiritual home." One frequent volunteer, Jona, told me that though she had been raised in a very religious Jewish family, she had never felt comfortable

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<sup>43</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>44</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

with religion until she found her “spiritual home in Zen Buddhism.” When first exploring Buddhism, Delia signed up for a weeklong Theravadin retreat despite never having done any Buddhist practice. After her first day, she said that “I just felt like something in me came home.”<sup>45</sup> The feeling remained very strong for Delia, who said that “every time I went on a retreat, I felt ‘Ah. This is home.’”<sup>46</sup> Lenore also knew after her first service that Buddhism was going to fill an important place in her life. Having been through an ugly breakup, Lenore tried various religious practices before coming to a Japanese Soto Zen service at the City Center. During all services at the San Francisco Zen Center, there is a period for nine prostrations to a statue of the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. Despite some initial resistance, Lenore explained that “when I did the full prostration where you touch your head to the ground, there was just this intense feeling of relief and homecoming.”<sup>47</sup> After a painful divorce and her daughter’s departure for college, Morgan followed the advice of her father and visited Green Gulch. For her visit, she decided to take a class, “and I was driving down the road—this was sixteen years ago this February—and Mika was teaching the Life of the Buddha. I felt like I was home; I walked into her class, and everything she said just resonated with my heart.”<sup>48</sup> This feeling of homecoming deepened as Morgan deepened her Buddhist practice. She decided to take full-ordination vows and “when my teacher shaved my head, I felt like I finally became what I came into this life to be.”<sup>49</sup> Morgan’s experience of fulfillment through her Buddhist practice, as well as that of many other Green Gulch residents, indicates both a period of alienation before encountering Buddhism and the homecoming it provides.

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<sup>45</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Lenore. Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

Homecoming language not only reveals a previous period of loss and confusion, but also the fact that one has ended that disorientation and has reached a place of psychological safety. Buddhism, therefore, must be addressing these feelings of disorientation. Just as in the tumultuous decade of the 1960s, the contemporary global context produces a strong sense of anxiety. Feelings of non-integration exacerbate this anxiety as Americans question their societal value system and find it rife with consumerism and materialism. This consumer culture spawns intense feelings of alienation and disgust in American Buddhists, leading to their eventual spiritual quest and Buddhist practice. Buddhism is therefore helping Green Gulch residents to control, understand, and ameliorate feelings of distress and unease caused by the chaotic world and the American culture around them.



## Chapter 2

An investigation into a culture's values must undoubtedly include its traditional religions. Already losing faith in American culture, American Buddhist practitioners often find Christianity and Judaism predominantly faith-based and therefore inadequate to provide the moral ideals and guidance necessary to engage with consumer culture. These feelings cause some Americans to move away from traditional American religions, which they perceive as primarily focused on personal salvation, and into religions such as Zen Buddhism, which strongly proclaims a rhetoric of saving all beings. Through their Zen Buddhist practice, Green Gulch residents believe that they are working to save all beings and end their suffering, a feeling which the more traditional American religions cannot provide them. I will show how this desire to save all beings is often what attracts practitioners to Zen Buddhism, and is often used to define Buddhism and Buddhist actions in contrast to traditional American religions. I will then consider the effects the emphasis on saving all beings has on American Buddhist religious efforts—specifically a focus on the practicality of action, a rejection of faith-based practices and beliefs, and a celebration of the nontheism of Buddhism.

The rhetoric of saving all beings pervades Mahayana Buddhism and is intimately tied to the bodhisattva ideal. Although the idea is complex and has fluctuated greatly in its exact definition over time, “the bodhisattva is accepted by all Buddhist traditions as one who has seriously taken a vow, properly speaking in the presence of a previous Buddha, to follow the path to Buddhahood.”<sup>50</sup> In Mahayana Buddhism, of which Soto Zen and the San Francisco Zen Center lineage are a part, the bodhisattva became a goal “all should finally take upon

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<sup>50</sup> Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000), 137.

themselves...to attain Perfect Buddhahood for all.”<sup>51</sup> Individuals, therefore, are perceived as having the ability to adopt the bodhisattva ideal and to be “the shepherd, who follows his flock into the shelter of the pen and closes the gate behind him.”<sup>52</sup> Simply put, in Mahayana Buddhism, any individual can in theory eventually save all beings through becoming a bodhisattva. In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, an 8<sup>th</sup>-century manual for becoming a bodhisattva, Śāntideva encourages students to graphically visualize the sufferings of the world and to identify with suffering beings:

I should eliminate the suffering of others because it is suffering, just like my own suffering. I should take care of others because they are sentient beings, just as I am a sentient being...if one thinks that the suffering that belongs to someone is to be warded off by that person himself, then why does the hand protect the foot when the pain of the foot does not belong to the hand?...therefore, to the extent that I protect myself from disparagement, so shall I generate a spirit of protection and a spirit of compassion toward others...therefore, in order to alleviate my own suffering and to alleviate the suffering of others, I give myself up to others and I accept others as my own self.<sup>53</sup>

The bodhisattva—an individual dedicated solely to the practice of saving all beings—exists as a crucial piece of Zen Buddhist philosophy.

Modern authors writing for a western Buddhist audience echo Śāntideva’s interpretation of the bodhisattva path. In popular Buddhist literature, the drive to save all beings in response to a suffering world—in effect to be a bodhisattva—is presented as the primary goal of Buddhist practice. In her essay on Bodhisattva Peace Training for political activists, Tsering Everest explains that “we [Buddhists] want to help the world become peaceful and clean.”<sup>54</sup> Expanding

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<sup>51</sup> Williams, 139.

<sup>52</sup> Donald Lopez. *The Story of Buddhism* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 73.

<sup>53</sup> Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryāvatāra)*, trans. Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1997), 101-106.

<sup>54</sup> Tsering Everest, “The Bodhisattva Peace Training,” *Buddhism Through American Women’s Eyes*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1995) 112.

this sentiment, Everest connects a specifically Buddhist development of compassion to the realization that another's suffering is like one's own:

Buddhists want to relieve the condition of suffering, outwardly and inwardly. This aspiration is further enhanced by the realization that I am not the only one suffering. Just as I suffer, everyone suffers—some more, some less. Whether beings are visible or invisible, none is exempt from suffering...The Bodhisattva Peace Training is based on bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is a selfless aspiration to attain enlightenment so that all beings can be free of suffering. This compassionate attitude is based on a firsthand understanding of suffering, with no rose-colored glasses.<sup>55</sup>

Shunryu Suzuki explains that when an individual sees another suffering “you should be like Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva—you should become like the one who is suffering, and you should suffer as that person suffers. Because of your innate love, your instinctive love, you share the suffering.”<sup>56</sup> Celebrating the infinite love and compassion of the bodhisattva, Suzuki describes it as the paradigm for Buddhist practitioners. Buddhist authors encourage readers to work to save all beings and embody the bodhisattva ideal.

Green Gulch Farm Dharma teachers present the bodhisattva ideal as the model for the community. In several Dharma lectures, the teacher would remind all present that they were bodhisattvas, often with a brief discussion of what that meant. During a lay ordination ceremony, individuals were told that they were “baby bodhisattvas, and all beings in all realms rejoice and flowers fall from the sky because the followers of Shakyamuni have taken bodhisattva vows.” In a book residents referenced to me repeatedly, Green Gulch Farm Senior Dharma Teacher Reb Anderson encourages students to embrace the bodhisattva ideal, writing that bodhisattvas “are able to be kind and helpful under all circumstances, in all realms of being. They join hands with all beings and walk through birth and death together with them. This is their only

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<sup>55</sup> Everest, 108-109.

<sup>56</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness*, ed. Mel Weitsman and Michael Wenger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 46.

wish...Throughout their daily lives, and even on the verge of death or when about to be born, they cut off all side roads and just strenuously and ceaselessly embrace and sustain all beings.”<sup>57</sup> Throughout his published lectures, Anderson encourages his Zen students to ceaselessly work to save all beings and to ameliorate the pain of suffering creatures. The bodhisattva ideal, powerfully expressed as the desire to save all beings, is a crucial piece of Mahayana philosophy emphasized at Green Gulch Farm.

Individuals at Green Gulch Farm often speak of the concept of saving all beings as what initially attracted them to Buddhist practice. Ryoshu explained that when new Zen students come to him, “there’s a feeling of ‘How can I help? How can I serve? How can I help the planet survive this kind of crisis that we’re in?’”<sup>58</sup> Gawain, who was living at Green Gulch in the Farm Apprentice program, first interacted with the community when he came to volunteer on the farm. While initially ignorant of Buddhism, Gawain was moved by the idea of saving all beings, and his interest in Buddhism grew from that basic attraction:

I might have had some interest. I mean I did have some interest about five years ago when I came here as a volunteer, and I didn’t know it was a Buddhist farm. I thought it was [just] a farm, and before we started they did a chant and it included saving all beings. So I thought that sounds nice, you know, [when] having a farm, and I thought, “What religion was that, that would include everything?”<sup>59</sup>

Like Gawain, it was the bodhisattva ideal which Gabrielle found appealing. Although daily life at Green Gulch is colored by both the monastic lifestyle and the bodhisattva ideal, Gabrielle discussed the intention to act in the world as a bodhisattva as attracting her to residential Buddhist practice. She explained that “when I was here before, people would talk about being monks. I always thought, ‘That’s dumb. I’m not a monk.’ But I have always thought, ‘I’m a bodhisattva. That’s what I’m here to learn about.’ How do you save all beings? What does that

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<sup>57</sup> Reb Anderson, *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts* (Berkeley: Rodmell Press, 2001), 79.

<sup>58</sup> Ryoshu (resident 35 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 26 June 2007.

<sup>59</sup> Gawain (resident 4 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 9 June 2007.

mean?”<sup>60</sup> Rebecca was raised in a Jewish family and first became interested in Buddhism after a study abroad experience. Since that trip, she has spent a significant amount of time at various Buddhist centers. When asked what made Buddhism unique from her Jewish upbringing, she explained that it was her identification with Buddhism’s emphasis on compassion and love for the world:

Because I associated Judaism with materialism and improper political moves, it was like, “Oh, I’m around people who just want to be good.” I wanted to be around people who just wanted to do something good for the world. That’s the only thing that ever made sense to me. These people just want to send out love and compassion and kindness. Wow, that’s me.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, volunteer Glory viewed Buddhism and its expression at Green Gulch Farm as “the religion...of kindness,” which attracted her to both Buddhist practice and to the community:

I think the religion of Green Gulch Farm is kindness. As the Dalai Lama said when a news reporter said, “What is your religion?” He said, “My religion is kindness.” People here have problems, just like anywhere else, but they make a very concerted effort to be kind to one another and treat people in a respectful manner, even someone you might not think is worthy of respect at work or in the street. What I like about Green Gulch is the kind way, the advanced way, the enlightened way, the effort to treat people kindly and to resolve problems and to not be violent or aggressive. Those are the most important things to me.<sup>62</sup>

Residents of Green Gulch Farm practice Buddhism due to its rhetoric of bodhisattvahood, saving all beings through universal compassion.

It is often the traditional Mahayana bodhisattva ideal which draws individuals into practicing specifically Zen Buddhism. For a long time, Delia practiced in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. However, she wanted to feel actively engaged in helping the world, which her Theravadin practice did not provide her. After attending a Zen retreat, she was inspired by the bodhisattva ideal to begin practicing Soto Zen Buddhism:

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<sup>60</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Rebecca (resident 6 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 30 June 2007.

<sup>62</sup> Glory (resident 2 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

She [Zen teacher Joanna Macy] kind of introduced the bodhisattva concept to me; that's the thing that really got me when I first got here. It's really missing from the Theravadin practice, though certainly you hear the word mentioned in Theravadin circles, because people read widely. I think that focus again and again on the practice of becoming selfless—which is still a very difficult thing in this culture—and this focus on dedicating your life to other beings and having formalized ceremonies—just doing it again and again and again. It fit in with my ideas about wanting to contribute something to the world.<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, Arthur understood there to be two different types of Buddhism, “that first category [Theravada] is all about nirvana. Seek nirvana, attain nirvana, keep nirvana. The second group [Zen] says nirvana is nice, it's cool, but it's not what it's all about. Because what it's really all about is taking care of the world.”<sup>64</sup> The pervasive bodhisattva ideal, particularly stressed in American Zen Buddhism, causes these Buddhist practitioners to engage with Zen Buddhism rather than other available Buddhist lineages.

Beyond simply initiating Zen Buddhist practice, the desire to live out the path of saving all beings can lead residents to deepen their practice in life-long ways. Odin spoke of being attracted to Buddhism by the bodhisattva ideal, and then entering the priesthood to fulfill the role of saving all beings:

It's a long job, right? It's a huge thing, bodhisattva. But that's what I want to do; that's what I want to be. And that's how I got into the whole priest thing, because I was told that was bodhisattva training. I feel like some of the stuff I've been doing, I've been thrown into. I'm just a kid from the West Coast, who surfed and smoked pot; I did all that. I don't do it anymore. But that's a story, that's not who I was, but that's who I thought I was. And now I'm this religious seeker who's mostly celibate. So, I'm thrown into that circle. Because you don't have to be a Buddhist. I could do something totally different. I don't know if I could be just as good a Buddhist if I was back to the layperson.<sup>65</sup>

Odin's desire to save all beings inspired him to engage in Zen Buddhist practice to the highest levels in the hopes of achieving the bodhisattva ideal.

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<sup>63</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Arthur (resident 4 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 26 June 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Odin (6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 7 June 2007.

Green Gulch Farm residents use the concept of saving all beings to define Buddhism and Buddhist teachings. When asked about the connection between environmentalism and Buddhism, Peter—one of the youngest residents of Green Gulch, staying for several months—replied, “I think [environmentalism is] an integral part of Buddhism, but I think there’re a lot of things that are an integral part of Buddhism. Like helping the poor, helping the emotionally troubled—anything that has compassion has a Buddhist sentiment to it.”<sup>66</sup> His perception of Buddhist practice as “anything that has compassion” was reiterated throughout my interviews. Tatsu, who had been a resident of Green Gulch for several years, defined a Buddhist specifically by a desire to save all beings: “Buddhists, we’re not interested in nirvana. Our desire is to save all beings, to share our knowledge of Buddhism with all beings. So nirvana isn’t part of the picture for me.”<sup>67</sup> When asked about the core of Buddhist teachings, several people identified it as saving all beings. Daiuki explained the essence of Buddhist teachings by retelling an experience between herself and her teacher: “Mika and I were talking about *it* during a practice discussion, and I asked Mika if she knew what *it* was. She laughed a really full-bodied, open laugh. And then she got really quiet and calm and said, ‘It’s love.’ So, the Beatles knew that.”<sup>68</sup> Saving all beings is so important a concept for residents of Green Gulch Farm that they use it to define Buddhism and Buddhist action.

The emphasis on saving all beings leads to an insistence on the practicality of actions. Individuals at Green Gulch do not desire beliefs, they crave specific ways they can live in the world to realistically ease suffering. A European student living at Green Gulch for several years, Theodosia explained how Buddhism and Buddhist practice affect her life everyday:

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<sup>66</sup> Peter (resident 5 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 28 June 2007.

<sup>67</sup> Tatsu (resident 14 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 13 June 2007.

<sup>68</sup> Daiuki (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 8 June 2007.

So for me, Buddhism is always something really practical...the speech and the brain thing, it's totally useless to me. If I can't apply it to my life and my relationship with my coworker, or my relationship with the food I get served, if I can't apply the teaching to that, then I don't care of it for a moment...I want to work to apply the Dharma to my work and my being.<sup>69</sup>

Expounding upon her attraction to Buddhism, Hannagei said that "it's practical; it had some practical tools to inquire into the questions that I had. It helped me to keep asking, not to just stop at a belief."<sup>70</sup> Delia emphasized that Buddhism was a way to live in a painful and confusing world, saying that she felt it had "a lot to offer people to meeting the reality of being human."<sup>71</sup> She explained her distrust of religions based on belief systems rather than on practical action in the world:

The thing I like about Buddhism is that I feel much more trusting of a tradition that says, "There's nothing really there and there are certain questions we won't even address because they make no sense. Let's just talk about how we are, how we're going to live. Let's just explore what can be done, and how we can relate to everyone around us."<sup>72</sup>

Residents of Green Gulch Farm focus on the practical applications of their Buddhist practice, believing that it allows them to better act to save all beings.

Green Gulch residents often contrast this Buddhist emphasis on practical action with the faith-based religions they rejected, primarily Christianity. Helena questioned her Christian identity during her teenage years and felt that it was ineffective in helping her live in the world around her:

My mom wasn't too crazy about me. I spent a lot of time on my own. And I just felt like, "How is this religion helping me get through anything?" It doesn't teach me how to live without having a dad. It doesn't teach me how to live when my mom doesn't want to take care of me anymore. It just didn't feel like there was

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<sup>69</sup> Theodosia (resident 4 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>70</sup> Hannagei (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 16 June 2007.

<sup>71</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>72</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.



anything for me to grab onto and help me get through the more difficult things in my life.<sup>73</sup>

While greatly respecting the beliefs of Christianity, Elayne, an ordained priest, ultimately abandoned them as well. She felt that they were overly focused on faith and not in touch with the realities confronting her:

I was doing volunteer work in one of these Good Will food bank operations, and seeing people processing so much stuff in and out, and realizing the great need, and that the need would never be met. Realizing that we [Christians] had these great beliefs and yet they really didn't seem to fit with things. So, that was kind of a breaking point for me.<sup>74</sup>

Elayne went on to explain that Buddhism, unlike Christianity, provided a path of practical action to become an individual who can help those suffering in real ways:

One of the first lectures I attended, the teacher talked about the bodhisattva vow, and that wasn't so different from the Christian message; they were pretty much the same. That was a revelation. One of the things I used to talk about with my Christian friend was that Jesus opened up his ministry to everyone: "I have come to open up the prisons, to set free the enslaved." And when my teacher mentioned the bodhisattva vow, I was like, "Wow, same text, but I can do it too! I wonder if that's what Jesus meant."... And yet, one of the things I like about Buddhism is that in Christianity, there are all these things they said that were good things, but there was no way to get there. It was just like, "Things ought to be this way. If you are a good person, you should be this way", but OK, how do I get there? There didn't seem to be any method. Some of the Buddhists around here will slap you with the platitude, "No method." But there is a method [in Buddhism], something to work with.<sup>75</sup>

Like Elayne, Lin was originally a Christian, but found Christianity to lack realistic action in the world. She was attracted to the practical methods Buddhism provided. When asked what made Buddhism unique from her experience with the Episcopal Church, Lin explained:

Well, the [Buddhist] practice is something to do. There was something to do in the Episcopal Church, but it was very little, and it certainly wasn't so personal. You can go with this group of people on that day and sing these songs. But the idea of actually being given instruction for sitting meditation, it was like "Oh my

<sup>73</sup> Helena (resident 1 week). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 28 June 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Elayne (resident 9 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 1 July 2007.

<sup>75</sup> Elayne (resident 9 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 1 July 2007.

God, there's something to do. That would be fun." And that was very powerful to me.<sup>76</sup>

Residents often rejected their earlier religious identities due to these religions' perceived deemphasis on practical action in the world, instead perceiving Buddhism as more effective in the realistic work to save all beings.

A key component of this pragmatic operation in the world is a rejection of faith and faith-based practices. Frequently, American Buddhist writers discuss the effects of Christian theism on the surrounding culture, one going so far as to claim that Christians engage in "systematic torture and extermination of those who would see things as they actually are in this world."<sup>77</sup> He goes on to call Christians "the mystics who blacken our minds with pretended light."<sup>78</sup> While there is little of this vitriol at Green Gulch Farm, there is a palpable sense that relying over-much on a theistic philosophy prevents one from acting as a fully compassionate entity in the world. A beginning Zen student staying at Green Gulch for a few months, Edward grew up in South America with a very religious Catholic mother. However, he rejected Catholicism as a useless endeavor:

Praying...I never really was a person who likes to have faith in this or that entity, so, for me it would be useless just to kneel at the church and hear what the priest has to say...I believe more like Buddhists would say. Everything is one mind—Buddha mind. There is no personal God; that is idiotic. It is very childish to think that there is this guy sitting in a cloud. They are only children's tales.<sup>79</sup>

Liam agreed with Edward's distaste for faith-based practices. When asked what he liked about Buddhism, he replied that "it's more intelligent. I was impressed that Buddha just wouldn't be bothered with the question of God. I was impressed with its intelligent psychology, whereas

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<sup>76</sup> Lin (resident 30 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 3 July 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Hayes, 45.

<sup>78</sup> Hayes, 45.

<sup>79</sup> Edward (resident 2 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

Christianity was pretty ineffective psychology, stupid psychology.”<sup>80</sup> Indeed, when discussing the difference between Christianity and Buddhism, Lisa—a member of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order who was visiting Green Gulch—explained it as “do you believe in God or not? And I don’t. Not in a God up there who is telling you what to do.”<sup>81</sup> Odin explicitly tied this lack of a theistic deity to inspired action in the world and personal responsibility to perform that action, saying, “that’s the whole thing about Buddhism, it’s like no god, no deity doing anything. It’s you, what can you do? How are you going to find this out? How’s it going to work for you? How can you work with the situation?”<sup>82</sup> The strong rejection of faith-based practices as ineffective even extended to Zen Buddhism itself. Cameron, a European student who had been a resident of Green Gulch for only a few years, recalled a practice discussion which reinforced his incredulity of Buddhist ritual services, which often incorporate prostrations, offerings and chants for cosmic bodhisattvas and Buddhas:

I had a guy who’s the Tanto [Head of Practice] at Tassajara, was really great, and I wish I had a tape recorder. I was in a practice discussion with him and he said, uh, [Buddhist ritual] service, and all the things you do in service, is for people who don’t understand it. I love that! Finally, someone speaks the truth! So I kind of have that feeling about [religious] service and the religious aspects of [Buddhist] practice. It is, I mean, it is sort of an expedient means. Some people are attracted to it; it pulls some people into the practice. But I don’t think the practice...I mean it’s not what the practice is.<sup>83</sup>

As a means to better achieve practical action in the world to save all beings, residents of Green Gulch Farm view faith-based religious practices and the religions which support them as ultimately ineffective.

Before coming to Green Gulch, many individuals had already rejected faith-based religions and practices; therefore, they were attracted to Green Gulch Farm and Buddhism by its

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<sup>80</sup> Liam (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 21 June 2007.

<sup>81</sup> Lisa (resident 3 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 4 June 2007.

<sup>82</sup> Odin (6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 7 June 2007.

<sup>83</sup> Cameron (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

mirrored rejection of faith elements. Patrick was a Canadian Zen student living for several months at Green Gulch, though he had spent time at the other San Francisco Zen Center residential communities. When asked what attracted him to Buddhism, he specifically cited its nontheism:

It [Buddhism] was removed from God, for one thing, which has a lot of negative connotations for me personally. It was living simply and there was no afterlife cause I don't believe in afterlife. I can't dedicate myself to a faith that has an afterlife, so my options were fairly limited in that respect, and I wanted to figure out a way to live here now instead of waiting for some paradise later on. And Buddhism called to me in that respect, at least Zen Buddhism did.<sup>84</sup>

Gabrielle remembered attending Church services with her grandmother as a child, but was shocked by the Christian emphasis on sin. Buddhism's lack of the concept of sin appealed to her:

I couldn't think that this world that I believed in would have anything to do with sin and going to hell. It just didn't make any sense to me. So when somebody was telling about this other way of practicing, it was just everything I believed in already. My understanding of it at the time was, if you do good things, good things will come to you.<sup>85</sup>

American Zen Buddhism's non-emphasis on various sins and damnations also attracted Delia. She explained her nontheism as a life-long endeavor into which Buddhism fit:

Well, I'm a recovering Catholic. I was brought up Catholic, and as many other former Catholics that I've talked to, you reach a certain age—11, 12, 13, 14, somewhere in there—where you start to have really good teachers and they're teaching you to think. And it doesn't make any sense. I would talk to my parents, and they would say, "Because I said so." This just made no sense to me. It may have made sense to people at some point, but for me, it didn't make sense, and I went off into philosophy. I kind of went into a whole secular thing and put any ultimate questions about reality aside. With Buddhism, you can still kind of do that.<sup>86</sup>

Like Delia, many Green Gulch residents began practicing Buddhism specifically due to its reflection of their personal philosophy of nontheism.

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<sup>84</sup> Patrick (resident 2 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 6 July 2007.

<sup>85</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>86</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

This air of nontheism pervades Green Gulch Farm's interpretations of Buddhist practice and Dharma. All explanations of what are traditionally faith-based practices—bowing, prostrating, offering incense and light—were explained not as honoring cosmic bodhisattvas, but rather as honoring the bodhisattva spirit in oneself. One woman I talked with told me that her Dharma teacher had explained the prostrations done to Mañjuśrī every morning as a sort of physical exercise after sitting meditation. In a breakfast conversation, Odin admitted to desiring more faith-based practices at Green Gulch. However, surrounding residents laughed and told him “go to the Tibetan Buddhists; there is no place for that in Zen!” Individuals would frequently talk proudly of the nontheism of Buddhism. When Green Gulch hosted an Interfaith event, inviting adherents of many different religions to come and participate in a day-long spiritual retreat, the Director of Green Gulch—who was co-leading the retreat—asked all residents to be compassionate towards the guests. Someone joked about how uncomfortable the Christian visitors usually were at Green Gulch, and another resident replied, “They have a god; we have no god. It can be a pretty big bridge to cross.” This was followed by “Good, that way they won't try to convert us!” Often used by residents to contrast Zen Buddhism with other religious traditions, nontheism is a celebrated aspect of Buddhism at Green Gulch Farm.

Many residents of Green Gulch Farm frequently questioned the religious nature of Buddhism itself, defining it instead as a philosophy. An individual who was once involved in the business world, Lance was highly suspicious of anything religious. However, he became comfortable with Buddhism by considering it a philosophy rather than a religion:

But this seems more like a philosophy to me, as opposed to a religion. I think in my mind, it's just because there is no deity or God, and this concept of you having your own Buddha within you. So, it's all within you whether you realize it or not.

That appealed to me, as opposed to some idea of a savior or other things outside, which probably don't exist.<sup>87</sup>

Cameron agreed with Lance, considering Buddhism his personal philosophy rather than his religion:

Well, for me, the core, the teachings, I don't find religious at all. I don't like religion; I still don't like religion. I don't consider myself religious. And, uh, I don't even consider myself a Buddhist... There's just something about the teachings, at least not all the teachings, but the teachings I am most attracted to are the ones that are the least religious. And there seems to be almost no need for the religious aspect, as far as I am concerned.<sup>88</sup>

Shala was a young woman in her 30s who was training to be a priest. When asked what she found unique about Buddhism from the other religious traditions she could have practiced, Shala cited the non-religion of Buddhism:

I think the way Buddhism isn't a religion. I'm trained as a scientist so I feel like I'm somewhat skeptical about organized religion. My version of Buddhism is a study of the mind; it's a science and a philosophy.<sup>89</sup>

Tristan also questioned the religious nature of Buddhism. Insightfully comparing English uses for the word *religious*, he explained his life at Green Gulch Farm: "I religiously get up in the morning, and I religiously go to Zen practice, and I religiously have lunch, but in the sense of harboring a belief, [Buddhism is] not religion to me."<sup>90</sup> These interviewees explicitly rejected their Buddhist practice as the expression of a religion, viewing it rather as a philosophy and therefore developing the ability to act compassionately in the world.

At Green Gulch Farm, Buddhist life is defined almost completely by the ideal of saving all beings. In a culture perceived as rife with consumerism, Buddhist practitioners reject traditional American religions as based primarily around faith and not focused on helping the

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<sup>87</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>88</sup> Cameron (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>89</sup> Shala (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 27 June 2007.

<sup>90</sup> Tristan (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 19 June 2007.

suffering beings in the world. Buddhism for them is a religion defined by the central concept of saving all beings, expressed most commonly through the bodhisattva ideal. Emphasizing this practice of saving all beings, American Zen Buddhist practitioners focus on the pragmatic aspects of Buddhism, a key piece of which is a rejection of faith and faith-based practices. However, one might wonder what exactly Green Gulch Farm residents actually do to save all beings. Indeed, in her 1976 analysis of Buddhism in America, Emma Layman asked “whether or not Zen in America is such as to promote the bodhisattva ideal. For some it undeniably is; but with the increasing tendency on the part of Zen Buddhists to become isolated in enclaves, for many it would seem not to be consistent with the Judaeo-Christian goal of involvement of man with man.”<sup>91</sup> Thirty years later, the question still remains valid, and one may inquire how exactly Green Gulch Farm residents work to enact this bodhisattva ideal. In the following chapters, I will illustrate the primary ways the Green Gulch residents manifest their desire to save all beings. While not engaging in obvious social work such as soup kitchens, children’s homes, or food drives, Green Gulch Farm residents perceive their existence as a community to be a form of practical engagement to save all beings.

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<sup>91</sup> Emma McCloy Layman, *Buddhism in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), 78.

### Chapter 3

Brian Victoria, scholar of Zen Buddhism, once told me that Buddhism is a religion for people who are suffering, and Green Gulch Farm certainly supports his assessment. Frequently at Green Gulch Farm, I was told that before a bodhisattva can go out to save all beings, he or she must first save him- or herself. Many Americans experience intense emotional suffering and self-hatred. In this chapter, I will show how this emotional suffering is conceived by some Green Gulch residents as the product of consumerism, though this is not a view held by all. Whatever the cause of personal suffering, however, the Green Gulch Farm community encourages residents and visitors to work to overcome their emotional pain using Buddhist philosophy and practice in what is arguably therapeutic labor. The therapeutic aspects of Zen Buddhism manifest themselves in several ways: a systematic study of the mind, an emphasis on self-acceptance, and encouragement for individuals to open emotionally. Finally, I will indicate that the community conceives of saving oneself through therapeutic Zen practice a crucial piece of saving all beings.

While it is acknowledged in Buddhism that all beings suffer, some Buddhists specifically indicate consumerism as a source of Americans' emotional pain. In his radical criticism of nearly everything associated with western culture, Richard Hayes identifies consumerism as a source of self-loathing:

We are surrounded daily with commercial messages that cultivate an ethos of immediate gratification of all personal needs, to the exclusion of all other pursuits, and encourage us to despise not only ourselves but everyone around for not being twenty years old, slender, and provocatively attractive. We scoff at the mentality of the mass culture to which the advertisements pander, we laugh and feel sophisticated and cynical about it all, but to no avail. For we are the very mass culture we love to mock.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Hayes, 48.



Gabrielle echoed Hayes's discussion of American self-hatred as arising due to consumer culture. During a breakfast discussion, she claimed that American society molded children's and adults' minds to fill them with self-doubt and self-hatred so that they would continue to buy products. Her speech was met with nods of agreement by the surrounding listeners. These Green Gulch residents, as well as Buddhist author and scholar Richard Hayes, blame consumerism for perceived self-hatred and emotional pain in American society.

Whether or not the emotional distress is caused specifically by consumerism, many people are still in pain; therefore, American Buddhism often works as a therapeutic means to achieve emotional healing for these suffering individuals. This connection between Buddhism and therapy is arguably unseen anywhere else in the history of Buddhism. In his pivotal history on Buddhism in America, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, Rick Fields discusses the joining of Buddhism and therapy as a completely Western development. Fields notes that the connections between the two are not merely the outgrowth of modern therapeutic culture: "As early as 1934 Carl Jung had recognized that Zen and psychotherapy had a common concern, namely spiritual 'healing' or 'making whole'. Like psychology, Zen Buddhism spoke of mind and consciousness. D.T. Suzuki himself had attempted to use Western psychological terms to explain Zen Buddhism..."<sup>93</sup> Other scholars have noted the connection between Buddhism and therapy. James Coleman, who conducted an impressive quantitative sociological study of American Buddhists, writes that "the new Buddhism [i.e. American Buddhism] has absorbed a great deal of the Western understanding of personal psychology."<sup>94</sup> He found that therapists are more likely to participate in Buddhist practice than any other profession.<sup>95</sup> G. Victor Sogen Hori, a scholar of Japanese Zen in America, notes that among American Zen Buddhists, there is a "widely shared

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<sup>93</sup> Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake* (Boston: Shambala, 1992), 205.

<sup>94</sup> Coleman, 229.

<sup>95</sup> Coleman, 229.

assumption that Zen and psychotherapy are in some way similar.”<sup>96</sup> Ryo Imamura, a professor of psychology and Buddhist priest, has also found that Americans often conflate psychotherapy and Buddhism. When he speaks to Western Buddhist audiences, therapy is a constant theme:

They [Euro-American Buddhist audiences] seem to share a burning interest in how the Buddhist teachings and meditation can be utilized to cure the disease and dysfunction that appear to them to be legacies of modern Western life. They show little interest in and patience for the traditional topics that the Japanese American Jodo Shin Buddhists want to hear from me as a priest. Instead it is clear that they regard the temple to be a kind of therapy center and the Buddhist priest to be a type of psychotherapist.<sup>97</sup>

In a unique Western development, Buddhist practice within American society is oftentimes tightly linked to therapy.

Exemplifying the observed trends in American Buddhism as a whole, residents of Green Gulch Farm use their practice as a means of therapy to heal emotional pain. Liam described Green Gulch Farm as a treatment center, where the dividing line between doctors and patients was rather fuzzy.<sup>98</sup> When someone would express feelings of emotional pain or anxiety, the immediate answer from peers was to deepen one’s Buddhist practice and “sit more zazen.” Kojitsu explained emotional suffering as primarily a mental force of self-hatred and self-doubt, which Buddhism helped to stop:

Thinking’s telling you: “You’re no good; you’re too fat; you’re too thin; you’re stupid; you’re too wise; you’re too this; you’re too that. Do this; don’t do that.” And you start identifying with that as you, as the real you. Then you begin to suffer. We all do. This is natural, as human beings. But the [Buddhist] teaching is trying to show us that. It’s not the truth of who we are.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> G. Victor Sogen Hori, “Japanese Zen in America: Americanizing the Face in the Mirror,” *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 72.

<sup>97</sup> Ryo Imamura, “Buddhist and Western Psychotherapies: An Asian American Perspective,” *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 228.

<sup>98</sup> Liam (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 21 June 2007.

<sup>99</sup> Kojitsu (resident 30 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

Lin explained that while each individual suffers from different things, they often have striking similarities which can be helped by Zen Buddhism:

Nobody's got your particular troubles. But then there's a common ground. We can pretty much understand that it has to do with basic confusions about ourselves. Often it is a lack of self-worth and self-doubt, which is just a mistake. So, I think, undoing that misunderstanding about ourselves and our value, that is important therapeutic work. And Zen is very helpful with that.<sup>100</sup>

As a longtime resident, Delia explained to me that she often sees individuals coming to Green Gulch to "be fixed":

I think most people come to get fixed, or to fix themselves. And then they get here and if they let go of that notion, it's easier to get fixed. There's this quote from Dogen: "To carry yourself out and experience the world is delusion; to let the world come forward and experience itself is enlightenment." You're so open, and you're meeting everything that comes in, and it is experiencing itself through your mind.<sup>101</sup>

Like Delia, Elayne also saw suffering people coming to Green Gulch and perceived Buddhism and Buddhist practice as the cure: "There's a lot of wounded people coming here. That's a source of pain and we're compelled to ease that pain. It's perfectly natural and part of the growing process."<sup>102</sup> The residents at Green Gulch Farm clearly experience a strong therapeutic aspect in their Buddhist practice.

Indeed, many people specifically come to Buddhist practice after an emotional breakdown or a period in therapy. Arthur explained that "during the last year of college and for a couple of years after, I had a long series of difficult, dramatic situations involving physical and mental health. Turned out that meditation was the best medicine."<sup>103</sup> Aurora also used meditation to ease her emotional pain, because she "started to sit [meditate] more and more when my grandmother was very sick of cancer. I was very close to her and took care of her during

<sup>100</sup> Lin (resident 30 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 3 July 2007.

<sup>101</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>102</sup> Elayne (resident 9 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 1 July 2007.

<sup>103</sup> Arthur (resident 4 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 26 June 2007.

those years. There is something about this feeling of losing someone I love that made me start sitting more.”<sup>104</sup> Elayne began Buddhist chanting as a means to overcome her personally-directed negative emotions:

One reason I liked that text [Dhammapada] so much was that I had this tendency for negative thought, and I found that it was helpful to recite that text. I learned in an education course once that one way that children learn, and I am sure it’s true for adults too, is using rote memory, which after rote memory becomes a process of internalization. I liked what it said. It was very comforting.<sup>105</sup>

Reinforcing the therapeutic effects of Zen practice, Green Gulch residents often undertake Buddhist practice after a period of extreme emotional difficulty.

Similar to therapy and the therapeutic relationship, residents emphasized the emotional safety of Green Gulch Farm. When discussing a trip into a nearby town, Lance explained that “this woman just started this conversation and opened up. It was like the conversations here, where we feel very safe.”<sup>106</sup> In a guest student discussion, Helena described Green Gulch as a “safe environment” where she could face her irrational fears and conquer them. Morgan echoed Helena, explaining that Green Gulch provided her with a supportive community and an emotional safe-space:

You have to face yourself. You just sit there and face the wall, and it’s a mirror. It’s very safe because you can invite all the demons in, and you can look at all the icky stuff that blocks you, and just look at it. You can get really scared, and then let it pass...For me, it’s very safe. It’s a place where I can fall apart and have fifty or sixty people just be there.<sup>107</sup>

The residents’ view of Green Gulch Farm as a place of emotional safety further emphasizes the therapeutic aspects of Zen Buddhism.

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<sup>104</sup> Aurora (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 25 June 2007.

<sup>105</sup> Elayne (resident 9 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 1 July 2007.

<sup>106</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>107</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

The safety of Green Gulch allows residents to engage in a systematic study of the mind and thought patterns. When Hannagei was asked what inspired her to practice at Green Gulch Farm, she answered, “to really see, to learn to see, and to deepen my seeing to the true nature of mind. To focus on that and the value that comes from the repeated doing so, repeated seeking, and looking, and appreciating that true nature.”<sup>108</sup> Individuals are encouraged by older residents and teachers to keep track of their reactions to things happening around them every day as fodder for understanding the world:

Every scope of reaction is here [at Green Gulch], because that’s what you’re working with—the mind. What are your unexamined assumptions? Do you dare look at that? Are you going to bring both sides of yourself together? And not have it labeled? Just let it be?<sup>109</sup>

When I confessed to Erec some difficulties with the double period of zazen in the morning, he urged me to look at zazen differently—not as a means to stop thinking, but as time to simply observe my mind:

You sit and you meditate; you can watch the mind. You can see where you’re stuck, you can see habits of mind clearly that might be subterranean otherwise. You have some opportunity to configure your perception differently and let go of thoughts and habits which might not be so constructive.<sup>110</sup>

Studying the mind is strongly encouraged by the Green Gulch community and is one of the most important manifestations of therapeutic Zen.

As part of studying the mind and observing reaction patterns, residents of Green Gulch Farm are led to a deeper understanding of how they create suffering. Theodosia explained that, for her, Green Gulch Farm was a place where she could see “how I myself create my own

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<sup>108</sup> Hannagei (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 16 June 2007.

<sup>109</sup> Dara (resident 8 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 20 June 2007.

<sup>110</sup> Erec (resident 15 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

hell.”<sup>111</sup> Odin agreed, emphasizing that self study at Green Gulch was looking not only at how he hurts himself, but how he hurts other people and causes their suffering:

So that’s the study here, it’s to keep looking at that sense of self and to see how it can also hurt people. We try to promote it in our lives, but it can hurt people. I mean that’s one problem with it. Which is why sitting is good. Because then we aren’t hurting people by trying to get involved with them. Because of this false view that we have a self...and we all have that, it’s kind of like original sin.<sup>112</sup>

Through his personal examination of the Buddhist lay precepts, Lance explained how studying the mind and one’s personal action in the world can lead to a greater realization of responsibility in creating suffering:

You pick one [precept] and meditate on it for two weeks or whatever. At first, it’s just like, “Oh, a disciple of Buddha will not kill. Don’t kill people. I can do that.” But as you work it down, does that mean plants? Bacteria in the water? Or “Don’t take something which has not been given to you.” Well that’s easy in material things, but what about non-material. Are you taking someone’s time? Are you taking someone’s patience?<sup>113</sup>

Studying the mind engages Green Gulch residents further in therapeutic work by allowing them to perceive how they are creating both their own and others’ suffering.

Beyond acting as a therapeutic method for Buddhist practitioners, American Zen Buddhism’s emphasis on studying the mind’s reactions and thought patterns is quite similar to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), a popular form of psychological treatment developed in the 1960s. Like Buddhism, CBT encourages patients to realize that their thoughts make their reality, so that by studying their thought patterns, they can learn how to prevent suffering. Therapists who specialize in CBT help their clients to recognize “errors of thinking and logic that underlie emotional disturbance and to help clients identify and reprogram their overlearned

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<sup>111</sup> Theodosia (resident 4 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>112</sup> Odin (6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 7 June 2007.

<sup>113</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

‘automatic’ thought patterns.”<sup>114</sup> While Zen generally does not contain the CBT emphasis on “reprogramming” practitioners’ patterns of thinking, it shares much of Zen’s focus of noticing the mind’s methods of thinking. A feature especially similar to CBT, Zen study of the mind is expressed primarily as a study of the stories and patterns which the mind creates to explain, codify, and create the world around it. By recognizing and examining one’s personal stories, individual suffering and pain can be relieved. The Zen practice of studying the mind’s patterns of thinking and reaction is similar to the therapeutic method of CBT, implying not only that American Zen Buddhism has a therapeutic aspect, but also that it possibly can ameliorate suffering in Buddhist practitioners.

As many of the thought patterns residents observe in their own minds are filled with self-loathing, a second important piece of therapeutic Buddhist practice is self-acceptance. Shunryu Suzuki, upon whom so much of Green Gulch Farm’s understanding of Zen Buddhist philosophy rests, includes self-acceptance and the non-judging acceptance of others as critical pieces of Buddhist Philosophy. In *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Shunryu Suzuki explains that “we should accept things just as they are.”<sup>115</sup> He repeats this sentiment in *Not Always So*, where he writes that “our way [Buddhism] is not to criticize others but to know and appreciate them.”<sup>116</sup> Suzuki later expands on the individual battle against self-hatred and doubt:

Of course you are perfect—from the beginning. But it is not necessary for you to say that you are perfect. You are perfect even though you don’t realize you are perfect. That is why we say we are all Buddha and our Buddha nature is constantly developing.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Michael W. Passer and Ronald E. Smith, *Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behavior* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004), 561.

<sup>115</sup> Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 121.

<sup>116</sup> Suzuki, *Not Always So*, 9.

<sup>117</sup> Suzuki, *Not Always So*, 121.

Suzuki assures his readers that they “are perfect” and do not need to constantly think of faults and deficiencies within themselves. In *Branching Streams Flow in Darkness*, a commentary on the *Sandokai*, Suzuki further emphasizes themes of self-acceptance, writing, “there is nothing to compare yourself to, so you have your own value. That value is not a comparative value or an exchange value, it is more than that. When you are sitting zazen on the cushion you have your own value.”<sup>118</sup> In the definitive biography of Suzuki, *Crooked Cucumber*, David Chadwick writes that a particular hippie student of Suzuki’s “didn’t feel criticized by his new teacher [Suzuki]. On the contrary, he felt Suzuki was the first person ever who accepted him unconditionally...rather than being required to have faith in Suzuki, he found Suzuki demonstrating faith in him.”<sup>119</sup> Reb Anderson—popular Buddhist teacher, former abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, and “Dharma-grandson” to Suzuki—also stresses the importance of self-acceptance. When lecturing on “entering the Buddhist way,” he specifically tells students, “You don’t try to change yourself or others. You don’t try to improve yourself or others.”<sup>120</sup> Shunryu Suzuki, as well as his students, consider self-acceptance an important piece of Zen Buddhist philosophy, reinforcing the therapeutic aspects of American Zen Buddhism.

In line with Suzuki’s ideals for his Zen communities, interviewees frequently perceived Buddhist teachings and the Green Gulch Farm community as encouraging self-acceptance. When asked the essence of the Buddha’s teachings, Elayne said simply, “Be yourself.”<sup>121</sup> Shala explained the core of Buddhist teachings as “just to be who you are.”<sup>122</sup> In response to the same question, Dara answered:

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<sup>118</sup> Suzuki, *Branching Streams Flow in Darkness*, 67.

<sup>119</sup> David Chadwick, *Crooked Cucumber: The Life and Zen Teachings of Shunryu Suzuki* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), 172.

<sup>120</sup> Anderson, *Being Upright*, 12.

<sup>121</sup> Elayne (resident 9 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 1 July 2007.

<sup>122</sup> Shala (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 27 June 2007.



You can't be anything but who you are, that's the other part of the practice. If you're an extrovert, you're an extrovert. I thought, "I won't be me! I'll be this nice monk. I'll have this whole demeanor and department who's not me—not action oriented, busy." Didn't happen. I'm still me.<sup>123</sup>

Gawain explained that his practice leader stressed the importance of being gentle with himself and avoiding harsh self-criticism:

I think honesty with yourself, observing your thoughts non-judgmentally, and that's really hard! You know, you're always observing, but you're judgmental, you know, you're discriminative. You think this is good thinking; this is bad thinking; this is a good action; this is a bad action. But when you just observe yourself non-judgmentally, you can see who you really are cause you're not going to be hiding from yourself; you're not going to be afraid of who you are maybe.<sup>124</sup>

When telling me what she liked about Green Gulch Farm, Violet emphasized the community support to not criticize oneself: "I think there is a lot of encouragement [at Green Gulch Farm] to not judge yourself. Work with what is; don't judge it, but work with it. Be real with it. Don't hide it."<sup>125</sup> Morgan also felt community reassurance to stop self-judgment, explaining that "you are sort of encouraged to fall apart, and just be yourself, and let go of that tons of concrete of ego that has built up. It's OK to let it go; that's what I like about here, I can just let it go and be me."<sup>126</sup> Helena initially had a lot of trouble with early morning zazen, often becoming violently ill due to the sitting position, the incense, and the environment. Though initially scared about community censure, she was instead amazed by their lack of reproach:

I think we tend to err on the side of conservativeness. It's like well, I don't want to make any missteps, I don't want to do anything wrong. But yeah, people have responded very warmly and supportively, so it's like, "OK, mistakes are OK." So that sort of frees me up to get through my struggles a little easier, knowing that mistakes are going to be OK.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Dara (resident 8 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 20 June 2007.

<sup>124</sup> Gawain (resident 4 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 9 June 2007.

<sup>125</sup> Violet (resident 4 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 2 July 2007.

<sup>126</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

<sup>127</sup> Helena (resident 1 week). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 28 June 2007.

Using her personal interpretation of Buddhist philosophy to justify nonjudgement of self, Rebecca explained nirvana as “resting with yourself exactly as you are and being OK with everything you don’t understand.”<sup>128</sup> Acceptance of the self is considered a critical piece of Buddhist philosophy and a necessary component of the personal emotional healing Green Gulch Farm supports.

Tied into nonjudgement of self, opening emotionally to the world is the final important aspect of therapeutic Zen practice. Contrasting his life at Green Gulch Farm to his life in the business world, Lance stressed the emotional distinctions between Green Gulch culture and consumer culture:

The discussions here are really interesting because it’s safe here. People are very open, maybe too open. In the discussions at the dinner table, people really show what’s going on. Where I used to work, if you showed your cards, they would just be used against you. People were manipulative; you really *had* to wear all these masks. Here, that’s not the case. People will share; I can’t tell you how many times through discussion and talking about what’s going on, I’ve been able to go down to the next level.<sup>129</sup>

Lance then offered a concrete example of his emotional opening and burgeoning ability to act compassionately in the world, recounting a recent experience with a woman he recently met in a diner:

This woman was 54 and had been in the airline industry forever, and for some reason they had booted her out. She was going through this thing and was trying to figure it out. And we just talked about how her whole self-value was based on her job, but when that all went away...she has interviews, but they all want the 23-year-olds. Her self-value was all messed up because she doesn’t have the job. We just kind of talked, and I think she felt better when we got done...Three years ago, I would have blown her off; I wouldn’t have paid any attention or thought she had an ulterior motive.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Rebecca (resident 6 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 30 June 2007.

<sup>129</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>130</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

Rebecca also emphasized the distinction between the world inside Green Gulch and the world outside Green Gulch. She had stayed at Green Gulch the summer before, and explained that when she left, her heart felt so open and beautiful. But in her last year of college, “I could see other people suffering, and I could see myself suffering, but knew no way to stop it.” In her own imagery, Rebecca saw a sheet of ice develop over the ocean of her heart, closing her off emotionally once again. However, now that she was back at Green Gulch Farm, Rebecca told me she could feel the ice melting. During a snack time, Rebecca lamented the fact that everyone in the world couldn’t come to Green Gulch Farm and experience their hearts opening the way hers was. After his first experience with Buddhist practice when traveling abroad, Baldur “had a 4-year hiatus of total sensitivity to the world. I didn’t really realize it at the time, but the first two years were tumultuous. I didn’t know where all the turmoil stemmed from. Later on, I started to understand that it was this tenderness that appeared in me.”<sup>131</sup> Residents at Green Gulch Farm are engaged in opening emotionally and encouraging that emotional opening in others as a form of therapeutic practice contrasted with the isolating values of the larger culture.

Despite the therapeutic emphasis of modern American Zen, some residents accept that Buddhist meditation is not an elixir to cure all ills, nor does it remove the need for a therapeutic relationship. Lin explained that while she thinks zazen can be an important therapeutic tool, “I don’t think it is sufficient. I’ve been very grateful to have a long relationship with a therapist who has been tremendously beneficial to me. And I always recommend that too. I think it’s a big thing to be talking about yourself with somebody else who is there to do that with you.”<sup>132</sup> Similarly, while Helena felt that Buddhist meditation has been incredibly beneficial in her fight against her depression, it cannot do everything:

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<sup>131</sup> Baldur (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 15 June 2007.

<sup>132</sup> Lin (resident 30 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 3 July 2007.

I recognize that I just have low serotonin levels, and all the meditation is not going to make those go up. It [zazen] helps with my general state of mind, and I feel like I have more of a safety cushion from the depressive state with the meditation, but there is a chemical component that I feel like is not surmountable. Meditation is a wonderful thing, but it is not a panacea.<sup>133</sup>

Though Buddhist practice has therapeutic use, some Green Gulch residents understand that it must be supplemented in order to fully heal emotional suffering.

Residents of Green Gulch Farm use Zen Buddhist philosophy and practice as a therapeutic tool to save themselves from personal emotional suffering, which is sometimes perceived as the product of consumer culture. While other religious groups might not consider healing oneself to be intimately tied into the expressed bodhisattva ideal of saving all beings, the Green Gulch Farm community disagrees. Residents believe that this saving of self is intimately tied with the saving of all beings—both so that one can then go out and save other beings, as well as simply because oneself is included in all beings. Defending the value of his meditation practice, Lance explained that “you can look at it as you just locking yourself in a room to meditate, but I just know that my reactions here are completely different than they were before. Even if I don’t do anything, even if I just stay here; I just know that my practice has taken me to a completely different place.”<sup>134</sup> Often other guest students and myself were reminded that having compassion for all beings means having compassion for oneself. During a discussion session, guest students were told that while it may seem that individuals at Green Gulch Farm were not directly helping others, they were becoming at peace with themselves to act more effectively as bodhisattvas. When discussing human rights activists, Theodosia emphasized that before individuals work to change others, they must first change their own way of being in the world:

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<sup>133</sup> Helena (resident 1 week). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 28 June 2007.

<sup>134</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

I do think at the same time that if we don't work on ourselves first, we're just going to perpetuate the same energies that are coming from the people who do create conflict in the world...if we don't work on ourselves first, we are going to perpetuate the same violence we are condemning, we are perpetuating destruction and we are perpetuating pain...I actually think that it is really good for activists in general to sit down and not do anything for quite a while and really look at our own motivation and what is running us. Is it our own anger? If it's our own anger, it will not result in anything peaceful.<sup>135</sup>

In the process of healing herself, Rebecca envisioned her Buddhist practice not just as meditating, but finding a way to open her heart to all beings:

I think the way I think of Buddhism is different from most people. I don't think of it as just sitting like in Zen; I think of it more as practicing by creating a space and openness in my life so I can bring everything into me and nothing remains untouched. So that by embracing everything, you stop trying to go one way or the other and just kind of go. Zazen helps create that space. If you're around the kind of people, that energy. Doing whatever you love, that brings you to life, that creates a space. If you're not doing something you love, you're dying and the world closes up.<sup>136</sup>

Erec reiterated Rebecca's description of Buddhist practice as opening one's heart to the suffering world. He described his emotional opening—when combined with a Catholic religious understanding achieved through his youth—as a means to save all beings simply through being emotionally present with them:

When I go to the soup kitchen and I sit down across from somebody and listen very carefully to their story about how there is a severe coffee shortage and Starbucks is using chicory and hot water instead of coffee, sometimes I can tell that since I am listening to this other being very, very carefully, there is this feeling of gratitude...In those moments, a certain depth opens up. And my way of understanding, it's the Franciscan way—I learned from them—is “I was hungry; you fed me. I was naked; you clothed me. I was lonely in jail; you visited me. Whenever you do these to the least of these, you do them to me.” I think that what Jesus was expressing within Christian terminology, within his understanding that is a fundamental truth. And it could be easily translated into Buddhist terminology. We are all Buddha, if you ease the suffering of one being, you ease the suffering of Qwan-yin, who is listening to the cries of the world. I resonate very strongly with that.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>135</sup> Theodosia (resident 4 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>136</sup> Rebecca (resident 6 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 30 June 2007.

<sup>137</sup> Erec (resident 15 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

Erec's ability to act as an emotionally open person allowed him to act compassionately towards the suffering beings he saw around him. Green Gulch residents regard the practice of saving self as an important component in the process of saving all beings.

In a uniquely Western development, American Zen Buddhism is often strongly associated with psychology and therapy in the minds of practitioners, as well as in the larger culture. Some Green Gulch residents perceive consumer culture as a force causing powerful feelings of self-hatred and anger among Americans. Whatever the reason for personal suffering, Buddhism is used as a form of therapy, healing residents of their emotional pain primarily through three methods: study of the mind, self-acceptance, and emotional opening. The therapeutic saving of self is regarded as a critical component of the goal to save all beings: throughout Buddhist philosophy, saving oneself naturally leads to saving others. Though not the entirety of their bodhisattva work, residents of Green Gulch Farm conceive of themselves as saving all beings at least partially through their existence as a therapeutic community.

## Chapter 4

The word *commune* brings to mind images of hippies growing fields of marijuana, hopping into each other's beds at night, sewing their own clothes from hemp fabric, and singing about free love, the human spirit, and world peace. One does not imagine a spacious and lovely 24-person guest house, with open, breezy rooms; clean, warm sheets; and rates running up to \$175 a night. Nor does one think of a conference center with several available spaces, including one that can hold up to 50 people, and an individual whose entire job it is to coordinate these conferences. Certainly, no one expects buses of school children and hospice residents arriving to walk in the garden or farm and be educated about the flora and fauna. The idea of a day where hundreds of individuals come to this commune, listen to a weekly lecture, participate in a meditation session, respite with tea and muffins, and stand in the bathrooms to quietly brag about their child's elementary school achievements probably does not cross one's mind either. No one thinks a commune needs to hire Master Planners to fly from Seattle to help give it direction. One usually thinks of communes as groups of naïve dreamers trying to live out an idealistic worldview, and would never imagine that a commune can act as a retreat center, an educational center, a conference center, and a church all at once.

Green Gulch Farm, however, is just that sort of commune. While still maintaining a belief in the feasibility of saving all beings, it interacts with the surrounding residents of San Francisco to affect their lives in real ways. In this chapter, I will illustrate how Green Gulch Farm fulfills Rosabeth Moss Kanter's definition of a service commune through seeking to reeducate the larger American society by offering Buddhism as an alternative to consumerism. Residents provide a place where anyone can explore the Buddhist lifestyle and practice, as well as have the support of a larger community in enacting that lifestyle. Much of the reeducation

Green Gulch Farm hopes to achieve revolves around shifting from the self-centered philosophy supported by consumerism to a philosophy focused on the interdependence of all life, which is especially expressed through Green Gulch's commitment to environmental practice. Reflecting a desire for larger societal change, Green Gulch Farm does not expect its residents to live in the commune their whole lives, but rather encourages them to eventually leave the community and take the values they learned out into the world. As an important part of this leavetaking, Green Gulch Farm empowers residents to have faith in themselves and their abilities to enact their new value set in the larger culture. Through their work to reeducate American society as a service commune, residents of Green Gulch Farm are able to engage in what they can perceive as real, practical action to save all beings.

In the 1970s Rosabeth Moss Kanter published a study of 19<sup>th</sup>-century communes which is still frequently referenced today. Kanter divides communes into two main types—retreat communes and service communes—which she summarizes as “where retreat communes seek withdrawal from the society, these communes [service communes] seek engagement and involvement.”<sup>138</sup> While a retreat commune is similar to the stereotypical hippie commune of the 1960s and 1970s, the service commune possesses some particularly intriguing features. Kanter explains that “service communes define themselves as ‘helpers’ to the society. They choose a constituency, then concentrate their energies on reforming it.”<sup>139</sup> She goes on to identify the vast majority of service commune work as “education or re-education.”<sup>140</sup> In the structure envisioned by Kanter, service communes also have a distinctive two-tiered social structure:

They tend to be composed of two sets of people—a core group that makes a permanent commitment and takes responsibility for the commune's learning

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<sup>138</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 191.

<sup>139</sup> Kanter, 191.

<sup>140</sup> Kanter, 193.



functions, and a transient group with a more limited involvement and an expectation that they will move in and out of the group.<sup>141</sup>

The ideals of the commune often become personified in a single figure, who stands at the center of the group:

The group has at its center a purpose, and it often has an individual representation of this center in the person of a charismatic leader. The charismatic leader symbolizes the values of the group, representing the state of perfection that will be attained when the group's service is completed. He is the ultimate "helper," aiding the other helpers in the group.<sup>142</sup>

In analyzing the phenomenon of 19<sup>th</sup>-century communes, Kanter constructs the idea of a service commune whose primary focus is the reeducation of the larger culture.

Fulfilling Kanter's analysis of community structure and lifestyle, Green Gulch Farm acts as a service commune, providing an alternative to the larger culture and seeking to reeducate American society. Green Gulch Farm views itself and the enclave it creates as standing in stark contrast and opposition to the larger American culture. When the world outside of Green Gulch Farm is discussed, it is usually to show how deluded and confused it is in comparison to Green Gulch. During lunch one day, Dara explained to me how the American way of doing things is to strategize, make large plans, and manipulate the system to your advantage. This method was compared to Zen, which Dara described as more focused on meeting whatever comes towards you and not attempting to control events. Bernard, a Farm Apprentice, expressed frustration over the mechanized systems which abound in American culture. He explained how a single error at the beginning of the system would ruin the entire process, but the organic systems utilized by Green Gulch Farm were more flexible and allowed numerous opportunities for the error to become corrected. Referencing his former life in business, Lance revealed that he was

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<sup>141</sup> Kanter, 193-194.

<sup>142</sup> Kanter, 195-196.

“struggling for a little while with transitioning from my old value set [of American society], which was about money and security and having your house, those were the foremost things.”<sup>143</sup> Later, Lance returned the discussion to his previous life in business: “I didn’t listen to radio or TV or anything [when working in business world], but you still just get bombarded with that value structure; as soon as you meet someone [they ask], ‘What do you do?’, ‘I’m unemployed.’ ‘Oh.’ If I’m unemployed here, no one thinks twice.”<sup>144</sup> An important aspect of service commune psychology, Green Gulch residents commonly define themselves in opposition to the larger American culture, which both emphasizes their disassociation from American culture and the perceived need for societal change through reeducation.

Residents specifically reject American culture because they view it as saturated with rampant consumerism. Shunryu Suzuki wrote that “if your true nature is covered by ideas of economy and efficiency, Dogen’s way [Soto Zen Buddhism] makes no sense.”<sup>145</sup> Ivan Richmond, a second-generation American Buddhist who was raised by his mother and father at Green Gulch Farm during the late 1970s, refers to the community as “almost tribal in its insularity.”<sup>146</sup> In his book *Silence and Noise*, Ivan describes what he was taught as a child at Green Gulch:

The “outside” America was viewed by the people of Green Gulch as the world of unenlightened, slaves to the delusions of their society and culture. Outside, people were thought to be intemperate. Their minds, we were led to believe, were cluttered with empty ambitions and materialistic desires. In effect, we were taught to think of the world outside as the opposite of Green Gulch in every respect.<sup>147</sup>

While Ivan was certainly reared in a much more idealistic period of American Zen Buddhism, many of the emotions he describes still pervade Green Gulch Farm. During meal discussions, it

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<sup>143</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>144</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>145</sup> Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 93.

<sup>146</sup> Richmond, 128.

<sup>147</sup> Richmond, 7.

was common practice to criticize the material culture of America. Ama specifically called American culture a “disposable culture.” At a particular breakfast, when I put large amounts of brown sugar on my rice gruel, I received a lecture from a resident, explaining to me how the consumerism of American culture forces sugar producers to grow sugar instead of food, leading to eventual starvation. He suggested I severely limit my sugar intake as a means of working to prevent this possibility. During a work break, a resident explained to me how American children today are raised in captivity—with complete dependence upon their parents, the government, and social values—and placated with consumer products. Edward spoke of the conflation of happiness and comfort, connecting this to Western religion’s ineffective engagement with modern society:

I think now we are living in a religion of materialism...They [Christians] define happiness with comfort—a cozy house, a nice car, a nice job, lots of money in the bank. And this is happiness for them. So, the sense of religion is lost. In the Western churches, you cannot find happiness. It is the opposite, everything is gloom and sad.<sup>148</sup>

In daily conversation and life, America is often negatively referred to as a consumer society, further accenting the contrasts between Green Gulch Farm and the outside world as well as the need for reeducation.

Green Gulch Farm offers Zen Buddhism as an antidote and a method to fix the prevalent consumer culture. In *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Shunryu Suzuki says that “when everyone knows the value of pure [Buddhist] practice, we will have little conflict in our world.”<sup>149</sup> During a formal discussion at Green Gulch Farm, the guest student coordinator explained that people often think fondly of new things they can buy—a car, house, or clothes—but she described Zen Buddhism as jumping in and breaking the cycle of desiring. Kojitsu elaborated on feelings of

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<sup>148</sup> Edward (resident 2 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>149</sup> Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 74.

want he saw in his students, but emphasized that these unfulfilled desires for objects and things make an individual ready to begin Buddhist practice:

I do feel that people are more open to practice when they actually realize the world is *not* going to satisfy your needs. Ever. For a while, but only for a while. Because it's all important. Whatever you get, you lose. People, places, things are changing all the time. It's not going to work for you. And this is the definition of suffering. We're always looking for that thing that's going to last, and it never lasts.<sup>150</sup>

In talking about his past, Lance referenced the unfulfillment Kojitsu described. During his interview, he identified Zen Buddhism as helping him see the world differently:

I didn't mind working hard, but I did mind working hard to support that other system. So I was kind of looking into Buddhism and Zen. Just a lot of things clicked for me to be able to understand that you don't have to have that security. You don't have to have the car, you don't have to have all that stuff—and you can feel good about it.<sup>151</sup>

After her successful career in business, Morgan felt that her Zen practice was a renewal. When asked whether her corporate life affected her decision to become a Buddhist priest, she said, “I think this [Buddhism] is sort of the antidote to that [corporate life].”<sup>152</sup> Cameron concurred, explaining Zen Buddhism as the remedy for consumer culture:

I think Buddhism's pretty almost diametrically opposed to a consumer culture. I mean, so much of the teachings are about renunciation and kind of giving up worldly attachments that I think if one is practicing the teachings, it would be kind of really hard to live a regular, consumer lifestyle, like driving an SUV and buy, buy, buy and still be true to the teachings.<sup>153</sup>

When describing the value of zazen, Ash—a young priest who has been practicing Buddhism since graduating college—specifically emphasized its sharp contrasts to the consumer-driven world: “To do nothing [i.e. zazen] in a world where everything is ‘more than ever,’ so production oriented, and to just radically be with things as they are is so wonderful and such a break from

<sup>150</sup> Kojitsu (resident 30 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>151</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>152</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

<sup>153</sup> Cameron (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

the world.”<sup>154</sup> For residents of Green Gulch Farm, Zen Buddhism acts as the antidote to American consumer culture, and therefore provides the service commune of Green Gulch Farm with a means to effect changes in modern society.

In order to reeducate American society with Buddhism, Green Gulch displays an alternate way to live in the world from the typical culture. While seldom spoken about directly, when residents discuss the purpose of Green Gulch Farm, they often present it as showing the world an alternative to the larger consumer culture. When asked what Green Gulch offers the world, Elayne explained that it provides the opportunity “to see that you can live life a little bit differently. Just an alternative to the big, wide world.”<sup>155</sup> Morgan also saw Green Gulch as a demonstration of an alternate way of being in the world, explaining that “I think this place is really important, just to give an idea that there might be a different way to live your life.”<sup>156</sup> Echoing Elayne and Morgan, Gabrielle said that the importance of Green Gulch is that it can show that “there is an alternative way of living and that people are doing that.”<sup>157</sup> After lamenting the anger and frustration which often threads through daily human relations, Delia spoke of Green Gulch as “an example of how people can live in harmony. Sangha is living in harmony. You are bumping up against fifty or sixty people day in and day out, with different levels of stress and grumpiness, and just making it work.”<sup>158</sup> Residents perceive Green Gulch Farm as an institution offering cultural reeducation through demonstrating an alternate way to live and be in the world.

As part of offering an alternate way to live in the world, Green Gulch Farm attempts to exemplify a complete Buddhist lifestyle to guests and visitors as opposed to isolated religious

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<sup>154</sup> Ash (resident 17 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 13 June 2007.

<sup>155</sup> Elayne (resident 9 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 1 July 2007.

<sup>156</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

<sup>157</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>158</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

practice. Michael Downing emphasizes the lifestyle aspects of American Zen Buddhist culture in his sensationalist exposé of the San Francisco Zen Center, writing that “in effect, [the San Francisco] Zen Center had translated its spiritual practice into cultural, retail, and social experiences that made it possible for a few hundred devoted Zen Buddhists to transmit the ancient teaching of the Buddha, the dharma, to countless Americans.”<sup>159</sup> Residents also identified and celebrated the lifestyle-aspect of Zen Buddhist practice. Baldur explained to me that the long-term residents of Green Gulch Farm are “trying to adopt, incorporate, and encourage total integration with the Dharma.”<sup>160</sup> Throughout her interview, Gabrielle highlighted the lifestyle component of her Buddhist practice: “In reciting the refuges every morning, I am affirming that I am giving myself over to this practice, and that this practice is my life...”<sup>161</sup> Gwen defined her attraction to living at Green Gulch as “I can live here and live in a place, and be able to work here—to work here, live here, eat here—and have the practice be central to my life.”<sup>162</sup> Morgan echoed Gwen, explaining that at Green Gulch, we “live it—live the vow, and live the principles.”<sup>163</sup> Helena, who was a guest student for only a week, was struck by the devotion longer-staying residents had to Buddhist practice: “Everyone is very devout in their following of the forms, and they take it as a way of life. You’re not expected necessarily to integrate it into the rest of your life; it can be a way of life in and of itself.”<sup>164</sup> Green Gulch residents offer Buddhism not only as religious practice, but as a complete lifestyle in opposition to the consumer lifestyle of the larger American culture, encouraging the comprehensive reeducation goals of the service commune.

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<sup>159</sup> Michael Downing, *Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center* (New York: Counterpoint, 2001), xiii.

<sup>160</sup> Baldur (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 15 June 2007.

<sup>161</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>162</sup> Gwen (resident 15 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 14 June 2007.

<sup>163</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

<sup>164</sup> Helena (resident 1 week). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 28 June 2007.

Beyond simply offering an alternative lifestyle based on Buddhist philosophy and practice, Green Gulch Farm provides extensive support for an individual's study and enactment of that lifestyle. Indeed, Shunryu Suzuki connects this community support with the highest expression of Buddhist practice, claiming that "when we practice with the aid of the Sangha....we practice zazen [meditation] in its truest sense."<sup>165</sup> By far the most frequent topic of discussion during meals and free time was an individual's practice. It was common for someone to express a problem he or she was having with the practice, and then receive advice from peers. This supportive community was an important aspect of Green Gulch Farm for many newer residents. Edward had never before practiced in a community and "found it very interesting, because you can stay here for a time—paying very little—work, and have the meditation together with other people and all the community. It's a good support. You are not alone."<sup>166</sup> Gabrielle recounted that "initially when I was here, I felt such a strong sense of community. It was really a new concept to me to be living in an intentional community where all different people of all different ages were really just supporting each other."<sup>167</sup> Later in the interview, Gabrielle returned to the sense of community support she felt, saying, "I really feel like ultimately Green Gulch is this place where you will be supported to engage in your practice at whatever level you're at all the time. If you come and you're totally new, there are people who will support you to become engaged in that way."<sup>168</sup> Liam, who had practiced Buddhism on his own for many years, resoundingly expressed the value of the support Green Gulch provides for his practice:

Being here makes me a happier person. If I am not here, I become an angrier person; I snap at people more. Being here, my life works better. I think of the

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<sup>165</sup> Suzuki, *Not Always So*, 128.

<sup>166</sup> Edward (resident 2 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>167</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>168</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

Buddhist emphasis on Sangha. You meet with Sangha, and you will benefit, and you will then benefit others. You hang around with the wrong crowd, and you do the wrong things. You hang around with the right crowd, and you do the right things.<sup>169</sup>

Green Gulch Farm maintains a supportive community framework to help residents and guests deepen their Buddhist practice and express their alternative lifestyle goals, ensuring that the service commune's intent for societal change can be actualized.

As part of its desire to educate the general public, Green Gulch Farm allows a number of ways for people to visit and learn about Zen Buddhism. Many individuals come for a personal retreat on the guest program, staying in a luxurious guest house housing up to 24 people, with small private rooms and shared baths. A guest can come as a retreatant, which gives a discounted cost for the guest house because the individual works with the community in the mornings. Guest students live in community housing and follow the full daily schedule, paying only \$20 a day for room and board. There are also two several-month long apprentice programs, one on the farm and one working with the community, which provide free room, board, and Dharma education in return for labor. There are two practice periods each year, and opportunities for more permanent residence following participation in a practice period. Beyond residential stay, there is a Sunday program each week, with a Dharma lecture and meditation session open to all. Throughout the year, there are also frequent day-long retreats and workshops on issues pertaining to Zen Buddhism.

During the week, many of the facilities at Green Gulch Farm specifically offer educational experiences for visitors. The farm and garden run by Green Gulch do not bring in much income; rather they are used primarily for educational purposes. Scattered throughout the farm and garden crews' schedules are numerous school and organization field trips. One Sunday

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<sup>169</sup> Liam (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 21 June 2007.



guest specifically asked the head of the garden if schizophrenic patients that his wife worked with could have the opportunity to visit Green Gulch Farm and stroll around the gardens as a form of therapy. Dara explained to me that Green Gulch's environment provides education for everyone ranging from inner-city school kids to conceited doctors:

There are over 12,000-15,000 people that come through Green Gulch every year in a variety of forms. There's over fifty schools that come here. Some of these kids have never been outside of concrete in Oakland. The economic crossover of these kids is amazing—from the unbelievably poor to the amazingly gifted. And UCSF [University of California, San Francisco], many of their departments come here. And when they come and stay three or four days, you just watch these wonderfully arrogant doctors come in here, and by the third day, you just see them shift. The land here evokes that.<sup>170</sup>

Also discussing the educational value of the farm for inner-city visitors, Morgan told me, "I love it when we have inner-city school kids come here, because for many of them food comes from a vending machine and to let them see that food comes out of the ground actually is helpful for starting a chain of understanding where food comes from that they might not otherwise see."<sup>171</sup> This aspect of an educational institution has become so vital that Hannagei predicted it would have a greater importance in the future: "Last summer, they had this vision meeting, and one of the ideas was this place be an education center for groups. Since last year, there is this flow coming in. We have direction. Before, we were a stagnating pond because we had no direction."<sup>172</sup> Visiting student and adult groups offer an opportunity to enact service commune goals of educating the larger society and initiating social change.

Green Gulch Farm residents and teachers frequently stress the importance of understanding and embracing the philosophy of interdependence as a central component of desired reeducation and societal change. An explanation of the word *interdependence* within the

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<sup>170</sup> Dara (resident 8 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 20 June 2007.

<sup>171</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

<sup>172</sup> Hannagei (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 16 June 2007.

Buddhist context is necessary. Thich Nhat Hanh, famous for his succinct and ingenious ways of explaining Buddhist philosophy to American and European students, refers to this interdependence as *interbeing*—a word I quite like, if only because it is not so visually convoluted as *interconnectedness*, also a popular term used by Buddhist authors and scholars. In a commentary on the Heart Sutra, Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. “Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter-” with the verb “to be,” we have a new verb, *inter-be*. Without a cloud, we cannot have paper, so we can say that the cloud and the sheet of paper *inter-are*.<sup>173</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh expands his lesson beyond paper, through endless natural cycles of humanity that had to exist so that this piece of paper could exist:

When we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word *inter-be* should be in the dictionary. “To be” is to *inter-be*. You cannot *be* just by yourself alone. You have to *inter-be* with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.<sup>174</sup>

The philosophy of *interbeing* and the intrinsic unity of all life are important aspects of Buddhist thought.

Though Green Gulch Farm does not explicitly use the word *interbeing*—most often relying on its perfect synonym *interdependence*—the concept is an important aspect of Buddhist philosophy and compassionate action for the community. Reb Anderson writes that “the fundamental delusion of human beings is the belief that we exist separately and independently

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<sup>173</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, “Interbeing,” *The Heart of Understanding*, ed. Peter Levitt (Berkley: Parallax Press, 1988), 3.

<sup>174</sup> Hanh, 4.

from the rest of the universe...once we misunderstand ourselves in this way, it is inevitable that we will be primarily concerned with this isolated, precious self.”<sup>175</sup> When asked the core of the Buddha’s teachings, Erec connected an understanding of interbeing to the development of compassion to save all beings:

Do no harm. Do all good. And save the many beings. And actually, the last probably comes first. The other two are a way of figuring out how to go about it. So the first [is] compassion. Compassion is not some sentiment or emotion...but where the sentiments and emotions come from—a deeper place of connectedness and understanding interdependence. We cannot help but influence and impact each other. So, the path of compassion is to acknowledge that and incorporate that knowledge in one’s perspective and one’s conduct. Honor the effect and recognize the fact that we are all interconnected, therefore live in such a way that promotes the best for everyone and minimizes the hurt and harm.<sup>176</sup>

Shala also connected the development of compassion with a realization that all beings are inherently interdependent:

I would say the core [of the Buddha’s teachings] is wisdom. I think it’s just opening your eyes to how the world actually is, but not to do that for yourself, but just to be who you are. I think that’s the core. And who you are is realizing that everything is the same thing. And when you do that, you develop great compassion and help everything else ultimately.<sup>177</sup>

Kojitsu explained the development of compassion in ways similar to Erec and Shala, telling me, “the whole world and everybody in it is you, because there is no self or otherness. And that’s how compassion forms. You realize that you don’t fundamentally exist without everything else. And that becomes undivided or unqualified unconditional love or caring. Happiness. Bliss. So on.”<sup>178</sup> Largely due to its aid in the development of compassion, an understanding of the interbeing of all life is a crucial part of the alternative Buddhist lifestyle Green Gulch Farm promotes as a service commune.

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<sup>175</sup> Anderson, *Being Upright*, 10.

<sup>176</sup> Erec (resident 15 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>177</sup> Shala (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 27 June 2007.

<sup>178</sup> Kojitsu (resident 30 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

Residents and guests are encouraged to think of the world through an interdependent lens.

A guest student staying for two weeks, Ama was the only individual I met who grew up in a Buddhist home, albeit Soka Gakkai Buddhism—a sect very different from Zen. She explained that her time at Green Gulch Farm made her more aware of the interdependent nature of her food:

[I became] mindful of every single thing on my plate, what it took to grow them, maybe the faceless people involved in the growing. I'm just trying to be very aware of everything, no matter how small, even the herbs. Nobody thinks of the herbs when eating, but it took energy to grow that. And not just human energy, even the plant vectors, the pollinators, etc. So I try to imagine the energy that has flown into the food and will now flow through me that I will then use to do work. It will be a constant circulation like the ocean currents.<sup>179</sup>

Sofia, a guest student for three weeks who came to Green Gulch looking for a residential practice community, explained her zazen as a means “to return to that state of awareness of inter-connectedness or interbeing.”<sup>180</sup> Aurora, a foreign student residing at Green Gulch Farm as part of her priest training, also identified zazen as a time to be aware of interbeing. When asked about the nature of nirvana, Aurora recounted a memory which for her exemplified it, focusing entirely on the interdependence of herself with her environment:

I remember once I was sitting zazen, and it was a very hot day. And I start to be aware of how the temperature started to change outside of me. And then, I felt my body starting to get hot, hot, hot. Then, at the same time, my pores started to open, and my body started sweating. And all this happened like that, \*click\*. There is not outside or inside, the temperature is not outside. There is nothing to this concept of temperature or to this concept of body.<sup>181</sup>

Departing from traditional interpretations, Peter's discussion of nirvana clearly shows the lens of interdependent philosophy:

OK, nirvana is the complete conviction and realization that goes through every pore in your body....that perceptions of things and classifications you put on

<sup>179</sup> Ama (resident 2 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 7 June 2007.

<sup>180</sup> Sofia (resident 5 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 25 June 2007.

<sup>181</sup> Aurora (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 25 June 2007.

things, boundaries you put between yourself and things, are really just anomalies and aren't really existent. They don't have inherent existence. And at the same time, having that knowledge and being able to function perfectly well with perfect skill in regular life.<sup>182</sup>

Reflecting its importance in the alternative lifestyle advanced by Green Gulch Farm, interbeing is a prominent interpretation of daily events, practices, and Dharmic concepts employed by residents.

Beyond teaching and discussing interdependence, residents of Green Gulch Farm demonstrate and enact the philosophy in their daily conduct. My time at Green Gulch was rich with expressions of interbeing, some official and community-sponsored. This included the pre-breakfast ritual where residents would chant a verse prompting them to “reflect on the effort that brought us this food and consider how it comes to us,”—an implicit reminder of the interdependence of those eating the food with those growing, shipping, and preparing it. I volunteered with the Children's program one Sunday, where children leave the Dharma lecture to go into the garden or fields and participate in their own Buddhist-oriented program. During my experience, the children were read a book by Tony Paulo about a young man who makes a cloak. The individual who led the program brought in a sheep's fleece for the children to see, and then explained how many different things had to happen to it, and how many different people had to interact with it before it became a wool coat.

However, beyond these official acknowledgements, the most poignant and shining examples of an interbeing-laced mindset put into action came from the private moments of residents' lives. When walking, I saw a young priest pick up a remarkably large slug—which gave me an involuntary jolt of disgust—and move it from the center of the path, where it might be hurt, to a leafy plant on the side. While on childcare duty one day, the children refused to let

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<sup>182</sup> Peter (resident 5 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 28 June 2007.

me fill in a gopher hole—a job which I had been given by my family as a little girl to defend my father’s rose garden. Instead, they protected the hole with their feet and firmly told me that I was destroying a natural habitat, and that the gopher had as much right to live as everyone else. Protecting the rights of the smallest animals to live was an important piece of life at Green Gulch. The apprentices who worked on the farm tried to shelter and safely relocate the small mice that burrowed in the compost heaps. In light of the recent unexpected hiving of bees near one of the guest houses, the beekeeper spoke of his struggle to find a humane bee remover which did not chop up the bees, but only captured them; they would have to remain by the guest house until he found a proper removal system. On what is perhaps the most stereotypically American of all days, July 4<sup>th</sup>, the blackboard which showed the community what was being served for lunch, read, “Happy Inter-dependence Day! May all beings be Free!” Interbeing is a mindset evident throughout the daily actions of Green Gulch residents which they hope to impart to guests and visitors.

Beyond its articulation in residents’ daily actions, perhaps one of the most important and most noticeable demonstrations of the philosophy of interdependence in action is Green Gulch’s environmental consciousness. For a woman raised in comparatively environmentally-apatetic East Coast suburbs, the environmental consciousness of Green Gulch Farm was nearly overwhelming. Absolutely nothing is wasted—extra food is composted, even down to the bloated grains of rice at the bottom of the sink. What is not composted is recycled; trash is a final option only. All cleaning is done with vinegar and water or with tea tree oil. The tractors use recycled vegetable oil. When discussing the future of Green Gulch Farm, there is a constant focus—both spoken and unspoken—on the environmental impact of Green Gulch and how it can grow sustainably so as to not put too much pressure on the watershed or surrounding

environment. To that end, Green Gulch has created a staff position whose entire job is to consider such issues:

We have this position, which was started five years ago, and that is called the Land Steward. It's just a position of a person to actually pay attention to the bigger picture, and the watershed, and knowing people from the Park Service, and paying attention to what grows here, and what are the invasive plants, and do we need to do anything or not.<sup>183</sup>

When discussing environmental activism in American Buddhism, Stephanie Kaza references Green Gulch Farm's annual animal memorial service and tree-ordaining ceremony. She further explains that "a Buddhist environmental ethic is a virtue ethic, based fundamentally on development of consciousness and a sense of responsibility to act compassionately for the benefit of all forms of life."<sup>184</sup> With the official support of the organization, environmental consciousness is a critical aspect of life at Green Gulch Farm, and an important factor of every action undertaken by either the community or an individual.

Residents frequently discussed Green Gulch's commitment to environmentalism as an ideal expression of interbeing. When asked whether she considered environmentalism a crucial part of the Buddha's teachings, Delia responded with affirmation:

Yeah, I definitely do...There's taking it to this extreme where you are disking up the field and killing the worms. That caused Buddha a lot of pain, and I know people who won't work on the farm because of that. But living in such a way that acknowledges we are killing other things so that we can live. Acknowledging, thank you for giving us the wood for this house. Some of it is not using so much fossil fuel, it's just obvious. The whole world is seeing the harm that we're doing.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Gwen (resident 15 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 14 June 2007.

<sup>184</sup> Stephanie Kaza, "To Save All Beings: Buddhist Environmental Activism," *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher Queen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 168.

<sup>185</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

I asked Rebecca about the interaction she saw between the environmental aspects and the Buddhist aspects of Green Gulch Farm. She also affirmed the unity of all life and the necessary outgrowth of environmental consciousness:

I think that the environmental aspect is critical to the Buddhist aspect, and the Buddhist aspect is critical to the environmental aspect. They kind of feed into each other. You need both of them. If we're a part of everything—which is one of the main ideas, this interbeing thing—then how can you sustain yourself if you're not treating everything around you with respect?<sup>186</sup>

As a university student in Canada, Sofia was initially attracted to Buddhism by its environmentally-focused interbeing:

I was taking a class in university, and we were doing a religious studies class on environmental practices within religious traditions. And one of the professors gave us a poem, "Please Call Me By My True Name" by Thich Nhat Hanh. And in that poem she was talking about the Buddhist relationship to the Earth, and the sense of interconnectedness and interbeing which was revealed in that poem. There was that moment.<sup>187</sup>

When pushed to elaborate on her personal relationship with the Buddhist idea of interbeing and environmentalism, Sofia brought the two ideas even closer together:

You can't really separate those things. The concept of interconnectedness with nature, that sort of deep ecology thing where you understand that "I am the Earth, there's no separation," that's Buddhism. You don't do it because you have an agenda, you do it because that's how the Earth responds, and the trees respond.<sup>188</sup>

Residents perceive the philosophy of interdependence and its community expression as environmental consciousness a crucial piece of Buddhism and the Buddhist reeducation Green Gulch Farm hopes to achieve as a service commune.

Seeking to enact significant change in American society, one of the most important features of Green Gulch Farm is the impermanence of the residential community. The vast majority of residents are not expected, nor want, to live out their lives at Green Gulch as they

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<sup>186</sup> Rebecca (resident 6 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 30 June 2007.

<sup>187</sup> Sofia. Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 July 2007.

<sup>188</sup> Sofia. Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 July 2007.



would at a typical monastery. Whether they are staying for several years, a year, a few months, or even only a week or two, residents are expected to leave Green Gulch Farm and to take what they have learned out into the larger society. Individuals may return to Green Gulch after several years away or remain part of the community through volunteer work; however, few will be permanent residents. Lance expressed how inspired he was by those who left, and how they provided a model for his future:

There are people who were here ten years ago and keep coming back for a week each year. It's really interesting, because my ultimate goal is to go back [to the outside world] in some other capacity. So, it's really interesting to see people who have done that, gone back and continued practice, but are still able to be in that economic circle.<sup>189</sup>

Dara explained to me that residents do “not stay forever, because that’s not the way it works here.”<sup>190</sup> When I pushed her to expand on that statement more, she said simply that “this isn’t a place to live the rest of your life necessarily.”<sup>191</sup> Violet expressed a strong desire to leave the community at some point in the future “because I kind of want to just practice with everyone—to not practice as a separate entity, as a little community that’s apart from the breadth of humanity or Americans or society.”<sup>192</sup> Patrick had similar feelings, telling me that “life is practice. You don’t have to be in a monastery or a temple to practice. If you stop practicing, you don’t stop practicing, because life is practice.”<sup>193</sup> Green Gulch Farm encourages leaving the residential community and taking one’s practice out into the world, often an individual goal coinciding with that of a service commune.

Residents hope to take their newly learned values and skills into the world to change it.

Hannagei expressed that “I feel like I am getting ready to leave and have a certain sense of being

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<sup>189</sup> Lance (resident 3 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 29 June 2007.

<sup>190</sup> Dara (resident 8 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 20 June 2007.

<sup>191</sup> Dara (resident 8 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 20 June 2007.

<sup>192</sup> Violet (resident 4 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 2 July 2007.

<sup>193</sup> Patrick (resident 2 months). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 6 July 2007.

trained, and to know what I still want from my training.”<sup>194</sup> Gabrielle, who had left the community and then returned for another period of study, explained that she did not feel the need to live at Green Gulch to continue her practice:

Ultimately, I feel like where I am at in my life is to be out in the world and to work with other people. Somehow the community is supporting me, saying, “Go out and do those things. You don’t need to be here. You don’t need this space to continue with your practice. It’s not Green Gulch.”<sup>195</sup>

Gabrielle’s Buddhist practice helped her immensely to interact in the world in better, more compassionate ways:

Mindfulness practice in general is one thing I have tried to bring with me everywhere when I was not here. I really relied heavily on that concept when I was working up in Portland. I was doing social work, working with families with children ages 0-3 who were at risk for abuse and neglect. It was really heavy stuff, a lot of intense emotional stories. I don’t think I could have done that work without this mindfulness practice of just being present with what is being said and being open and aware of the other person’s needs—not just falling back to some story in my head about what is going on and spitting out about what I think they should do.<sup>196</sup>

Though residents may leave Green Gulch Farm, they feel that it provides them with skills to bring their alternative ways of thinking into American culture to both transform it and ease suffering.

Beyond carrying their new values, residents also feel the continued support of the Green Gulch community to act as a compassionate being in the world. Daiuki explained that “the Sangha is one of the jewels. They help you to stay focused and to be on the ground. And then you take this out into the world wherever you go.”<sup>197</sup> Rebecca also felt this Dharmic connection to the Green Gulch community, which helped her to understand her feelings of confusion concerning her Jewish identity:

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<sup>194</sup> Hannagei (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 16 June 2007.

<sup>195</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>196</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>197</sup> Daiuki (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 8 June 2007.

I never felt the sense of connectedness and community in the Jewish world that I've felt in the Buddhist world. When I left to go back to college, I felt like there were all these people in me that I could carry with me and not feel so lonely anymore in terms of what I wanted to do with my life and in the world. I've explored very Jewish communities and, while they were inspiring in their own way, they just weren't on the same wavelength as me in terms of saying, "I just want to do good in the world."<sup>198</sup>

Green Gulch Farm not only teaches a new lifestyle to residents, but also acts as a support system they can carry with them to encourage their efforts to heal and reeducate Americans outside the community.

Buddhist practice does not simply provide residents with a new value set and supportive community to effect a change in the world; many Green Gulch residents describe strong feelings of self-empowerment and confidence to actually enact that change. Erec explained that while Green Gulch Farm itself has no specific service efforts—instead seeing its service work as hospitality and offering education for individuals—it provides the encouragement and support for individuals to personally fulfill those service roles:

There is no Green Gulch program to go to the prisons. There is a little bit of Green Gulch support, but it is not so much...the name Green Gulch Zen Center is not on it anywhere. It is more like people in the community with the support of the community. Like for myself, there is some support to use work time to work at the soup kitchen. On an informal basis Green Gulch supports its individual residents to do various things.<sup>199</sup>

Reflecting strong themes of empowerment, Morgan described chanting as "finding my voice. I realize that times when I'm having trouble chanting, I'm having trouble articulating something about my life."<sup>200</sup> Later in her interview, Morgan recounted a time when she realized that her Zen Buddhist practice did not give her anything she did not already have; it simply nurtured her inner drive and ability:

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<sup>198</sup> Rebecca (resident 6 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 30 June 2007.

<sup>199</sup> Erec (resident 15 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>200</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

And then, one summer when I was at Tassajara<sup>201</sup>, I suddenly had this epiphany that Tassajara didn't give me anything I already didn't have. It just watered a seed, and if I worked on it, I could make everyday of my life like I was when I was at Tassajara. When I go to the conference office, or when I go to zazen, it's not work, and it's not sitting—it's just life.<sup>202</sup>

Gabrielle echoed Morgan, emphasizing how her time at Green Gulch showed her how to be her own teacher and guide:

I think that what I am appreciating about being here [Green Gulch Farm] now is that I feel like I am kind of being told in a lot of ways to believe in myself, to not depend on community, to be the thing that carries me to the next thing, to not rely on a teacher to be the one who is going to bring me to enlightenment or self-awareness. This is just a macrocosm of what is inside of us. Really you only kind of have your own perspective; you can only really learn from that. There will never be another you to teach you to be yourself.<sup>203</sup>

When asked the essence of the Buddha's teachings, Gabrielle said that "on a basic level, it is self-empowerment. It is this idea that we as humans are capable in and of ourselves of transcending the world as we know it and seeing it through this other perspective that will relieve us from suffering."<sup>204</sup> Green Gulch Farm and Buddhist practice help individuals to become self-empowered, so that they can be an influential force of change in the world, further extending the reach of the service commune.

Most importantly, Green Gulch's reeducation of American society through Zen Buddhism is the community's fulfillment of the goal of saving all beings. Former co-abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, and current abbot of the Berkeley Zen Center, Mel Weitsman writes that "our [San Francisco Zen Center's] purpose is to introduce people to Buddhism and to give them a place to practice. These are great accomplishments. Social outreach is important, but it

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<sup>201</sup> The San Francisco Zen Center's strict monastic community. Many long-term residents bounce between the various communities run by the Zen Center.

<sup>202</sup> Morgan (resident 6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 12 June 2007.

<sup>203</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

<sup>204</sup> Gabrielle (resident 3 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 5 July 2007.

has to be secondary.”<sup>205</sup> While initially frustrated by public lectures held at Green Gulch Farm, Delia came to see them and her participation in them as an expression of her vow to save all beings:

I think it’s [Sunday lecture program] part of the vow to help other beings. This is our practice, we find this helpful to us, perhaps you might find it helpful too. So, we offer it...For me, that feels like I want to do that. I want people to come and see the beauty of the physical space and to also see how people can live together—prepare food and eat together, do the dishes and laugh together. Go down Wednesday morning and hoe together. There is just something about sharing that. Just so they know that this is here. People who are teachers, part of their vow is to share the Dharma.<sup>206</sup>

Odin agreed, viewing Green Gulch’s open interaction with the surrounding public as “what we really are supposed to be doing. It’s part of our practice.”<sup>207</sup> When asked about the Guest House and its relation to Green Gulch’s Buddhist identity, Ryoshu explained:

It is both the intention of serving others in that way, and the opportunity to bring awareness to it, giving a full sense of commitment of bringing your whole heart to it...So part of our practice is being willing to take different roles in relation to other people; in one role, you simply take care of the space that you got to be in. I think that is completely part of our practice.<sup>208</sup>

Rebecca discussed Green Gulch Farm’s commitment to saving all beings and its seemingly inward focus: “You might feel that if you stay here too long, you wouldn’t be fulfilling that role of sending love and compassion out, but if you’re creating a place where people can come and reboot their batteries so that they can go out and give that love, we are doing that.”<sup>209</sup> In defense of individual Buddhist practice, ordained priest Ash told me that “others might look at Buddhist practice as a waste of time or kind of self-indulgent or something. It’s really the opposite but it’s

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<sup>205</sup> Mel Weitzman. Interview by Michael Downing. Quoted in *Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center* (New York: Counterpoint, 2001), 188.

<sup>206</sup> Delia (resident 7 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 18 June 2007.

<sup>207</sup> Odin (6 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 7 June 2007.

<sup>208</sup> Ryoshu (resident 35 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 26 June 2007.

<sup>209</sup> Rebecca (resident 6 weeks). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 30 June 2007.

hard to explain the practice to somebody who has no connection to it at all.”<sup>210</sup> Acting as a service commune and providing the opportunity for individuals to see and learn about Buddhism as an alternate way to live in the world is the culmination of Green Gulch Farm’s work to save all beings.

Trying to fulfill the role of saving all beings in a real way, Green Gulch Farm acts as a service commune reacting to the highly consumeristic society of America. Green Gulch Farm provides Zen Buddhist philosophy and practice as a remedy for consumer culture. By defining itself in opposition to the larger culture, Green Gulch Farm offers Americans the opportunity to learn about and practice an alternative lifestyle with the support of an extensive community. A crucial piece of this alternative lifestyle is the philosophy of interbeing, which Green Gulch Farm demonstrates most effectively through its environmental practices. Further demonstrating the large-scale societal change desired by service communes, Green Gulch Farm encourages its residents to leave and act in the world with their Buddhist value set. In this way, Green Gulch Farm perceives itself as saving all beings both through the reeducation that occurs in the actual community and the ripples of that education as former residents act compassionately in the world.

### **Conclusion**

NLM: At this point in your life, how would you define nirvana?

Ash: (blows raspberry)<sup>211</sup>

As a confusing world inspires Americans to reexamine their own culture, some find it infused with a consumer philosophy. Consequently, they begin to feel alienated from their own culture and disgusted by suffering from around the world—much of which they understand to

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<sup>210</sup> Ash (resident 17 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 13 June 2007.

<sup>211</sup> Ash (resident 17 years). Interview by Author. Digital Recording. 13 June 2007.

have been caused by their consumer culture. In response, some American new religious movements are becoming more globalized as they move away from philosophies perceived as self-absorbed, to those which work to include all beings. As they engage in modern spiritual quests, some Americans' religious impulses are dramatically changing to a more globalized salvation: nothing short of working to save all beings, in whatever tradition, can bring fulfillment. Expressions of this turn to globalized salvation contour the American religious experience in many different ways. Achieving global salvation through embracing diversity, Baha'i and other religions like it developed. The proliferation of acceptance of religious diversity and large interfaith movements also indicate a trend towards a broader understanding of salvation. Residential communities similar to Green Gulch Farm with an emphasis on vast cultural change, often also focusing on sustainable, environmentally-conscious living, have arisen around America—including various Zen centers, Jewish religion centers, and Catholic pseudo-monastic groups.

Zen Buddhism is an early example of this tendency, acting as a means for individuals to move from personal salvation philosophies to those of global salvation through environmental awareness. With intense focus on the bodhisattva ideal, American Zen Buddhism compels individuals to save all beings. Often the first step in saving all beings is saving oneself from emotional and psychological wounds. Green Gulch Farm and American Buddhist philosophy encourage this self-healing through a therapeutic understanding of Buddhist practice, including encouragement to engage in a systematic study of the mind, to practice self-acceptance, and to open emotionally to the world.

Beyond providing an environment where individuals can heal themselves therapeutically, Green Gulch Farm also works as a service commune, seeking to reeducate the larger society in

an effort to put the rhetoric of saving all beings into action. Rejecting consumerism as a harmful and exploitative culture, Green Gulch offers Zen Buddhism as an alternative value structure, with particular emphasis on the philosophy of interbeing. Long term residents provide a place where individuals can come to learn about Buddhism and find support for their Buddhist practice. Green Gulch residents are then encouraged to return to the larger culture and live their principles in a worldly context. Green Gulch Farm is the residents' practical expression of working to save all beings through its acting as a service commune.

It is important to remember throughout this study of religious identity and practice that the quest culture is still a prominent piece of our society and probably will remain so for some time. Individuals are always seeking, molding, and modifying their religious views and thoughts to fit into their contemporary context; Zen Buddhism is fulfilling a particular role in a particular time. What I have presented is a snapshot in time, not the whole recording of the course of Buddhism in American culture. Like all religions, Buddhism is flexible, and in the future it may fulfill a very different role in the lives of individual practitioners and the residential communities they create. However, this small snapshot can provide a means of looking at the larger recording, a way to understand future changes and place them in context, as well as helping to appreciate the religious currents in American life and thought. In the study of religion, I think it particularly wise to remember the words of Shunryu Suzuki to his Zen students: "The secret of Soto Zen is just two words: not always so."<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Shunryu Suzuki. Quoted from cuke.com, David Chadwick's web archival of Shunryu Suzuki's life and teachings. [www.cuke.com](http://www.cuke.com), 2008. 7 Mar 2008.

Two words becoming three is a little piece of Zen humor to break down conceptual walls.



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